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ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE



NEW stories presented by the master of **SUSPENSE**

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Dear Readers:

Despite our most recent scientific advances, and past, present and future excursions into the atmosphere; despite projected visits to Venus, the moon, and who knows what other planets, nobody seems to have come up with a solution for a recurrent problem . . . the common cold, so-called. As you will see by my pictured predicament on this month's cover, neither have I. It takes time, patience, and all sorts of soothing equipment to weather one of these pesky things. Nor is there any foolproof cure, as I said before, other than the standard "bed rest and plenty of liquids". Perhaps in the rarefied atmosphere of other planets, the germs die first, before attacking their betters.

At any rate, since this is the season when these minor irritations seem prevalent, at least in a large portion of this hemisphere, may I suggest that you lay in a supply of firewood, refreshments, and last but not least, stimulating, entertaining reading material. Under this last heading, I modestly suggest that you put Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine first and foremost, and if you have not already done so, don't forget to fill in your own and sundry gift certificates, for Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, in order to insure your continuing enjoyment of this publication during the coming year. That is my New Year's wish for all of you, dear readers.

Alfred Hitchcock

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JACK EUSTIS always wanted to be a horseman—cowboy, circus rider, trainer, breeder, any kind of horseman. Instead, because of practicalities, he became a local lawman and finally County Sheriff. Ironically enough, one of his first contacts with Ralph Berton was the day Ralph's wife Anita was killed by a horse on their big stud farm. It was clearly an accident. Anita's bay mare shied at a snake and hurled her against a rock, and brain concussion killed her instantly. A whole riding party witnessed it, and when the sheriff dropped by, it wasn't to ask questions but to offer condolences.

It was an odd time for a friendship to start, but something happened right then between Ralph



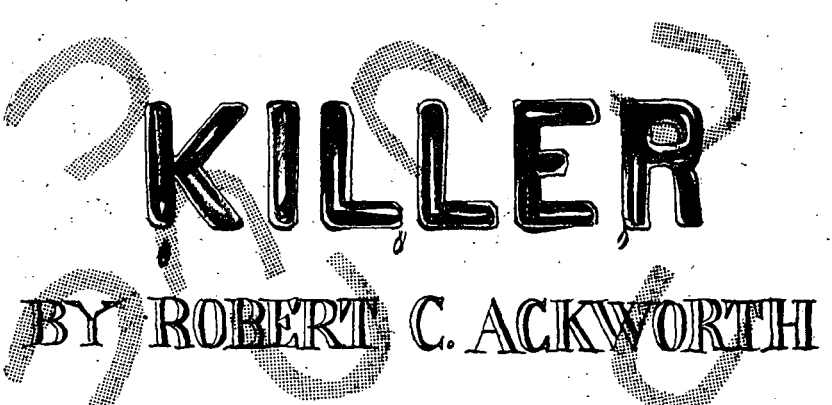
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In these days of mass communication media of several kinds, it is all the more surprising that the supposedly inarticulate, mistakenly referred to as dumb animals, can manage to communicate, clearly and unmistakeably, a definite message.



Berton, in his moment of pain, and the sheriff who had wanted to be a horseman; and during the next year—when a lot of changes took place on Berton's farm—Eustis was a frequent visitor at the breeder's stables and began to be somewhat of a horseman.

The big change at the Berton place was that it ceased to be a stock farm with a hundred horses roaming its fields and crowding its paddocks. Ralph Berton was told by Doc Wiley that he had to watch his heart. It was either slow down or die fast, and Ralph slowed down. He never even mentioned considering selling the place he'd built from scratch, the place that some said had made him a half million. But he did sell his stock except for six old-timers he kept for riding and for talking to and being with. He closed the upper story of the big house to ease the lot of Mrs. Howell, his housekeeper, and he didn't rest until his whole staff had jobs at least as good as the ones they'd had with him. He kept on old Willis Thomas, who'd been with him at the start, as farm manager, although



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there was little managing to do. He had two young fellows—Barry O'Shea and Timothy Ulden, both horse lovers—come out from town days to keep the snarl out of the place. And that was all.

Some said it was a waste and thought Ralph Berton ought to sell out and live in an apartment. Sheriff Eustis understood why he didn't. A man wanted to live where he was happy. And the doctor said that if Ralph was careful he could live twenty or thirty more years.



Jack Eustis soon got into the habit of stopping at the farm whenever he could. He and Ralph Berton became real friends, the main reason being that they both loved horses. Ralph wanted to talk about them and teach—and the sheriff wanted to talk about them and learn.

At thirty-four years of age, Jack Eustis learned to ride. He mounted a gentle old sorrel and walked and cantered her around the walking ring.

"Sit erect and don't roll from side to side," Ralph kept saying. "Only your lower spine should give—in rhythm with the horse's movement. You get that, and you'll be a rider."

Eventually Eustis was a rider, and then he and Ralph took rides over the hills of the farm. When they stopped to rest, Ralph talked horses and Eustis listened. Ralph knew horse-history from the time of the half-pint aborigine of cavemen days right up to the time of the thoroughbred. But the period he talked most about was the days of the wild mustangs, those descendants of the Spanish horse that had proliferated in the West until men had curbed them, then eliminated them.

Ralph imparted more than horse-history. He taught the sher-

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iff everything there was to know about treating a horse right—and even a little about breeding and training.

Then one day Ralph's younger brother—twenty years younger—came home to stay. Lloyd Berton had spent most of his boyhood here under Ralph's wing, but his restlessness and unsteadiness had taken him away to the merchant marine a few years back (and who knew to what else?—for Eustis had once received a vague inquiry about Lloyd from a chief of police in California). Some said that Anita Berton had disliked Lloyd heartily and had been glad when he'd left home. Eustis could believe that.

Obviously, Ralph Berton's helpers didn't like having Lloyd here again.

"Always wanting to be waited on, no matter how busy you are," Mrs. Howell sniffed to the sheriff one day. "You'd think he was a prince!"

Old Thomas, usually close-mouthed, made a comment to Eustis, too. "Won't do Mr. Ralph's heart no good having that scamp to worry over!"

Lloyd Berton was always pleasant enough to Eustis, but to the sheriff the young ex-mariner seemed a little too slick. His concern over Ralph—"I've come home to take care of you and see that you take it easy," he kept saying—seemed overdone. Eustis had a feeling Lloyd's real reason for coming home was to wait out inheriting Ralph's estate. With Anita gone, it stood to reason that Lloyd would now be the principal heir.

Lloyd rode with Ralph and the sheriff several times. Technically he was a good horseman in that the horse did as he directed. And he knew horses, having grown up here. But it was clear to Eustis that Lloyd did not love horses. He only wanted to master them.

Eustis felt uncomfortable about Lloyd, and he tapered off stopping at the farm, hoping Ralph would understand the reason without their having to talk about something that familial loyalty wouldn't let Ralph talk about.

Then one day when he hadn't seen Ralph for almost a month, Eustis chanced to drive by the farm of Morgan Raines, who had once been Ralph's competitor. When Ralph had sold his stock, Raines had bought a lot of it. Raines was leaning against his post-and-rail fence, and Eustis stopped to talk horses. Raines took him on a tour of his stables.

"You should have seen the rogue horse I had," Raines said. "A black beauty, but an unmanageable terror, and no good on a business

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farm. I tried to talk Ralph Berton out of taking him, but he wouldn't listen."

It seemed that two weeks ago Ralph had stopped to see Raines. Ralph had been bereaved at the death of his old roan gelding. He had seen Ebony (a better name for him would be Devil, Raines said) and it had been love at first sight on Ralph's part. He'd taken the horse home with him.

It worried Eustis that Ralph had taken on a burden that might prove to be too taxing for him, and the next day he dropped by. Lloyd was not in view. Ralph shook the sheriff's hand heartily, and neither mentioned the long time it had been since Eustis' last visit. Ralph looked different, and it was a long moment before Eustis realized why. Ralph's twill trousers and khaki shirt were sweaty and soiled. Usually he was neat and clean. Today he was as sloppy and grimy as Lloyd was most of the time.

"I'm a little odoriferous," Ralph grinned, "but it's because I'm trying to get Ebony used to me. A horse knows by his nose. No old mustanger would change clothes and thereby change his odor—when he was breaking a horse. That would mean starting all over again."

Ralph took Eustis to the only stable still in use and proudly showed him Ebony. The horse was handsome. He was blue-black and about fifteen hands and a thousand pounds. He had a strong body set off by an elegant carriage, a proud-rising tail, and a noble head. And he was comparatively quiet, only rearing up a little and nickering when they entered instead of trying to kick the box stall apart as the sheriff expected.

Ralph went right up to the horse and stroked the tapering muzzle. The horse fidgeted, but stayed fast in his stall.

"Every horse is born with a wild strain in him," Ralph said, "and this one has a double dose. He's had several owners, and I think one or more of them played dirty with him. A horse hates someone who mistreats him, and he can smell his enemy as far as he can smell water, which is far. What I'm trying to do is gentle him and show him I'm his friend—"

Suddenly the horse jerked his head away from Ralph and his teeth bared. He whinnied as his ears went stiff and upright. When the door from outside opened and Lloyd walked in, the horse reared high and came clumping down on his hooves.

"You make him nervous, Lloyd," Ralph said. "Let's go outside."

Outside, Lloyd turned darkly on

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his brother, pointing his finger.

"That's a killer horse if I've ever seen one, Ralph. None of us except you can get near him without him storming up—and he'll turn on you yet! The wild ones always turn, Ralph. Get rid of him!"

"Don't you worry, Lloyd. Ebony's going to turn out fine."

Lloyd shrugged and walked off, and Ralph frowned after him. Then he turned to Eustis.

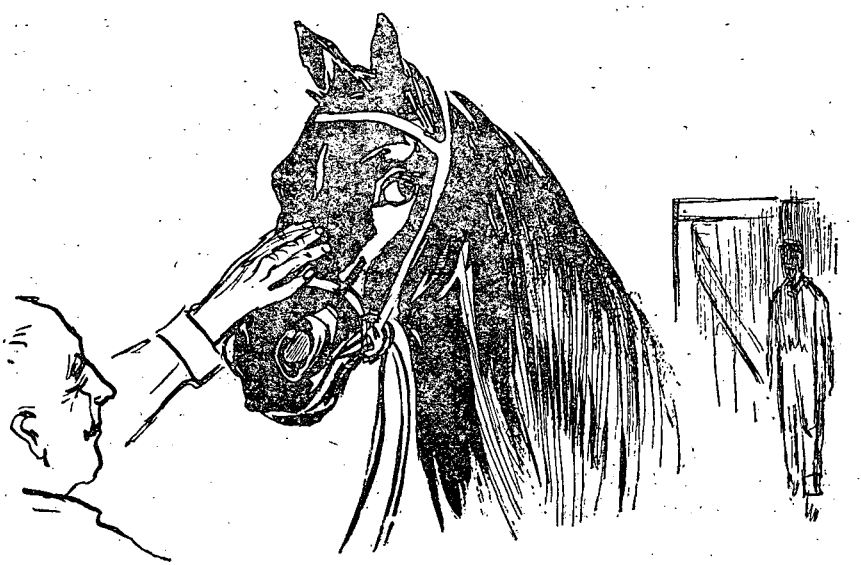
"Ebony's no killer, Jack. He was just born out of his time, that's all. Ebony should have been born a hundred years ago. Can't you see him, wild and free, leading his pack over the prairie?"

"I don't know, Ralph. Maybe Lloyd's right. You be careful."

For the next ten days Eustis was too busy with law matters to get back to the Berton farm. On the day he did, the skies were glowering by the time he arrived, in late afternoon. Except for Ralph, the farm was deserted. Lloyd was in town, Ralph explained, and Mrs. Howell was away visiting her sister, and old Thomas was with his sick daughter. The chore boys—Barry O'Shea and Timothy Ulden—had just gone back to town.

"Got something to show you, Jack," Ralph said with a smile.

Ralph took Eustis to the stable



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where he watched Ebony calmly submit to saddle and bridle. A minute later Ralph was riding him around and around the walking ring. The horse had beautiful movement, and Ralph reached down and patted his flank when he reined up beside Eustis.

"You treat a horse right—any horse—and one day he's yours," Ralph said, smiling again. "Wait till Lloyd sees this. The story is that Ebony's never let anybody stay on his back more than a minute."

When they got back to the stable, Ebony nickered and hooved the ground.

"That powerful nose of his smells the storm coming, though it's probably still hours away," Ralph said. "Storm and fire scare all horses."

Eustis was scared about something, too. He did not like the idea of Ralph being alone here. Suppose he had a sudden attack?

"Come home to supper with Nancy and me," Eustis urged.

"Thanks, Jack—but I've got to stay here and rustle up some grub for Lloyd when he comes. That guy can't even boil an egg on his own."

The sheriff left reluctantly, and felt edgy all evening. His nervousness increased when the violent storm broke around nine. Eustis could not remember a storm that made more noise and loosed more wind-driven rain than this one did in the hour it raged.

It was just ending when Lloyd Berton phoned that Ralph was dead!

Ralph Berton's body was bloodied as badly as any sheriff Eustis had ever seen, as badly as the worst of those lifted out from the tangles of car accidents. The body was awful, and so was the silence as Doc Wiley leaned over it. Doc had been Ralph Berton's physician in life. He was also County Coroner.

Doc rose. "Killed by hoof-blows," he said thickly. "He could have had a heart attack simultaneously. That's something we'll never know."

Eustis looked at the horse Ebony, whose hooves were covered with blood. The horse stood staring out of his stall, stood motionlessly, as if he had died standing up. It was as eerie as the scene Eustis had walked in on—the stallion whimpering over the man he had hooved to death, as if he were crying his regret. Ebony had submitted with peculiar docility when Eustis returned him to his stall.

The sheriff turned to Lloyd Ber-

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ton. "Tell us, slow and clear."

"Ralph and I were having stew when the storm came up. We heard the horses shrieking over the thunder, and Ralph wondered if they were all right. I think he was scared maybe this killer horse had broken out of his stall—which he had—and was going to do in the other horses. The lights went out just as we got to the stable." Lloyd stopped.

"Go on," Sheriff Eustis said.

"The noise from this dark stable was awful—worse than the storm noise. I knew this horse was kicking the place down, and I said it would be suicide to go in."

"And you didn't go in, did you?"

Lloyd's eyes narrowed. "Not then. Ralph sent me back to the house for a flashlight. When I got back down here, it was all over. I couldn't get near Ralph. I flashed the light in the horse's face, and he lunged for me. I got out just in time. I went in and called you."

The sheriff looked at the stolid, silent horse and said nothing.

"That murdering horse ought to be shot," Lloyd said. "And I'm just the man who can do it."

Eustis turned. "You're not shooting that horse. I'm ordering you not to. When and if that horse becomes your property, you can do what you want with him. But not until then. You understand?"

Lloyd hesitated, then glowered "When he's mine, he's dead."

Lloyd took a step—only one step—toward Ebony's stall, and the horse awoke from his sorrowing lethargy. His ears angered back, his eyes blazed, and his jaws opened as he reared up and came crashing down.

"You see?" Lloyd said, stepping back. "He wants to kill me, too."

There was something wrong about it.

The whole story, the way Lloyd had told it, made sense, and there was nobody to say it had happened otherwise. There were no grounds for an inquest, and the only witness was Lloyd, anyway, unless you counted those that couldn't testify—the mute horses.

It was neat and tidy, but there was something wrong with it, the sheriff kept thinking. And he kept searching inside himself for what was wrong, but he couldn't find it.

Ralph Berton had a big funeral, well attended, for he had been well liked. Soon afterward the sheriff learned that after Anita's death Ralph had made a new will leaving the bulk of his estate to Lloyd, but with handsome bequests for Mrs. Howell and old

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Thomas. The will provided that in the event of Lloyd's death before the will was executed, the farm was to go to the state university for use by its veterinarian school.

The day after the funeral, the sheriff chanced to run into both Mrs. Howell and old Thomas, though on separate occasions. They had both left the farm, after many years of service there, when Lloyd took over.

"If it was work for him or starve, I still wouldn't work for him!" Mrs. Howell sniffed, and old Thomas said substantially the same thing, adding that it was too bad Ebony hadn't made a better choice of victim.

"Of course," old Thomas said, "when a horse is scared, he'll turn on someone who loves him—and someone he loves. I think Ebony came to love Ralph toward the end. But he sure hates Lloyd. Hates him to death."

A few days after that, the sheriff ran into Timothy Ulden and found that both he and Barry O'Shea had been dismissed by Lloyd.

"Said he'd take care of the place himself until the estate's settled," Timothy said. "Then he's going to sell if he can get the right price."

"What about Ebony?" Eustis asked, wondering if Lloyd had ignored his order not to shoot the horse, ignored it on the basis that the order was not valid—which it wasn't.

"Never saw such a change come over a horse. Of course, I didn't see much of him, for Lloyd's tended the horses, but from what I did see, Ebony's lost all his spirit. I mean, he just stood in his stall, sadlike—like he was sorrowing himself to death."

What was wrong came to Eustis in the middle of the night, a week after Ralph Berton was buried. The remembrance, the connection, pounded up in him, bolting him awake. It was a slim thread, and he could be wrong, but he did not think he was.

He had to wait until a decent hour. As it was, he arrived at the funeral home while Charley Adamson was still at breakfast. Eustis sighed with relief when Charley said that Ralph's things were still there.

"Don't know why Lloyd hasn't picked them up," Charley said. "I've reminded him twice. There's a watch and a ring. And of course there's Ralph's bloody clothes, but I don't suppose Lloyd'll want those."

"I do," Eustis said, and walked out with them in a white box.

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Eustis headed straight for Morgan Raines' farm where he found the breeder looking at some new stock. Raines listened with widening eyes as the sheriff told him his new views on Ralph Berton's death.

"It's farfetched," Raines said, "but it's possible. Yes, it is."

"Will you come with me to the Berton place? I may need a witness."

Ten minutes later they drove in at the farm. There was no sign of life, and Eustis had a feeling that Lloyd was still in bed. He and Raines went to the stable, where they found Ebony lying in his stall. The horse did not stir when they stood over him.

"A horse will lie down to sleep or when he's sick," Raines said. He bent over the horse and frowned. "The horse looks gaunt—and his lips are caked. I think Lloyd's slow-killing the poor creature by starving him—and by withholding water. A horse needs twelve pounds of oats, fourteen pounds of hay a day—and watering twice—or he dies fast."

The sheriff's fists clenched. "Will you try to feed and water that horse, Morgan? I'm going up after Lloyd."

Lloyd Berton answered the door still pulling on his shirt. Eustis pushed past him, ignoring Lloyd's protest as he went straight into Ralph Berton's bedroom on the first floor and yanked open the closet door. He pulled jodhpurs and a shirt off hangers and turned to face Lloyd.

"You're coming to the stable with me, Lloyd," he commanded.

Lloyd paled and his eyes glazed with the fear of a trapped animal, but he walked to the stable—with the sheriff behind him, watching.

They found Raines kneeling beside Ebony. Raines looked up worriedly.

"He took a little water and some bran mash, but he's got to take a lot more before he starts to come out of this."

"We'll see what this makes him do," Eustis said, and placed the clothes from Ralph Berton's closet near the horse's nose. In a moment Ebony's head stirred and then he raised it slowly. He lowered his nose and nuzzled the shirt and jodhpurs and whinnied softly.

Eustis looked at Lloyd Berton. Every bit of blood seemed to have drained from the young man's face.

"And now," Eustis said, "we'll see how Ebony reacts to the clothes Ralph was wearing when he died."

The sheriff removed the clothes from Ralph's closet and replaced them with the bloodied clothes he'd died in. The sick horse re-

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sponded almost at once. His ears went back, his eyes blazed, his jaws opened, and his great body shuddered from his effort to rise and fight. The horse snorted his rage as his weakness forced him back down.

Eustis turned. Lloyd had stepped back, back, back, as if he were afraid the horse really would rise and attack him. He was at the door.

"When you saw Ralph's heart might not take him as soon as you wanted," Eustis said, "you took matters in your own hands. *You did it by dressing him in your clothes!*"

"I—don't know what you're talking about," the pale man said.

"The conditions were perfect. There were no witnesses. The storm had frightened the horses to frenzy. The lights were out, and they couldn't see. *And you knew a horse tells by his nose!* You knocked Ralph out and got him into your clothes. Then you carried him down here and shoved him inside, where Ebony was running loose. The clothes were permeated with *your* odor, and Ebony struck in the dark because he hated you—probably because you whipped him behind Ralph's back, or worse. It was murder as surely as if you'd struck the death blows yourself. You used your enemy—this horse that had finally found a friend, in Ralph—to kill your brother!"

There was a long silence before Lloyd said, falteringly, "You can't prove a crazy story like that. Who'd believe it?"

Morgan Raines spoke. "A jury will believe it when it sees this horse respond to these clothes the way he just did. And Ebony is going to recover to do that. I'm going to see to it—"

Lloyd wheeled and bolted, and Sheriff Eustis ran after him, but not too anxiously. He figured that Lloyd Berton was a coward, and he proved it. It took only one warning shot to bring Berton to a shaking stop.

Morgan Raines—the same kind of horse lover that Ralph Berton had been—said he would stay and see Ebony through the crisis. The sheriff would have liked staying, too, but he had another job to do. He had to drive Lloyd Berton in to jail.

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The human spirit is so constructed that when one is staggering under a crushing blow, blue skies and sunshine seem a monstrous piece of cruelty, and the happiness of others an affront too great to be borne.



It was worse than waking up in a strange place. There wasn't merely that moment of groping with the mind before memory came back. She felt nothing of recognition, even when she opened her eyes, nothing looked familar.

It was a pleasant room, dimly-lighted by a lamp of some sort over the bed. The walls were a muted color; and that was all there was in her line of vision, the walls and a tightly-drawn spread.

When she turned her head to

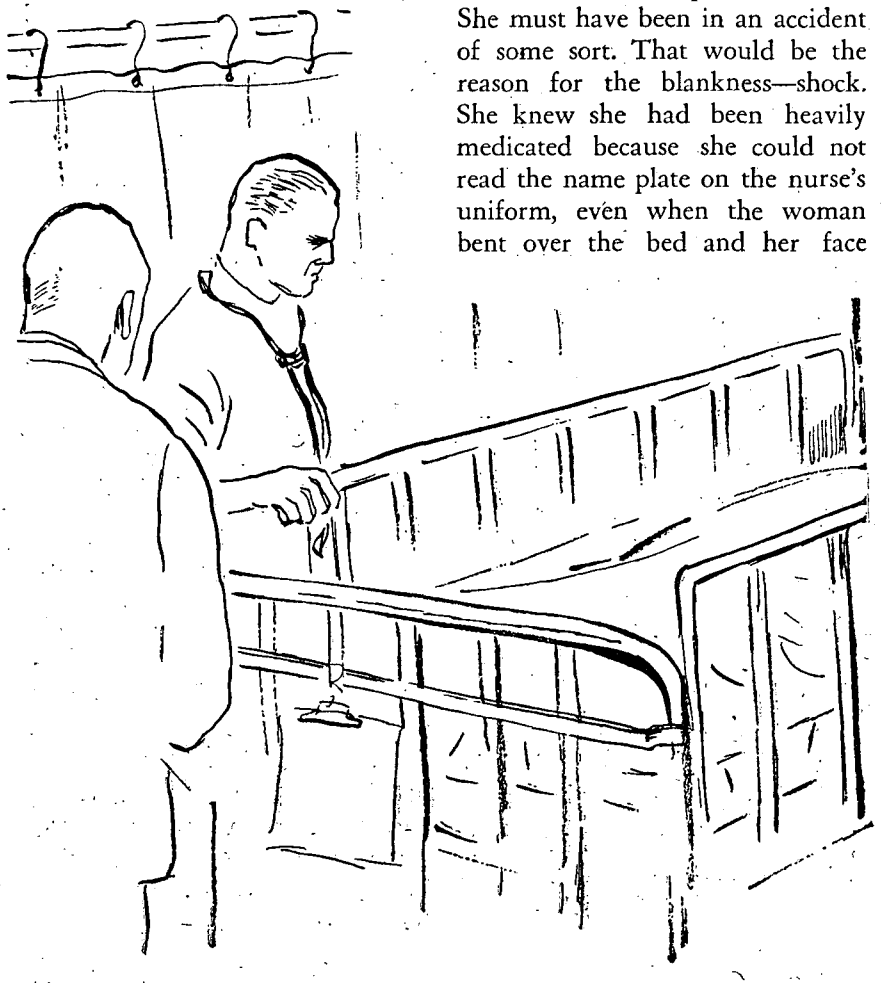


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look around, she saw that there were sides, small iron railings, on the bed. She was like a baby in a crib, secure in a little prison.

The door opened and a woman came into the room. Her shoes were soft-soled and her uniform made a whispering sound as she walked. The knowledge that the woman was a nurse pushed through the layers of blankness in Rhoda's mind. That she had recognized the face gave her a child-like feeling of triumph.

She was in a hospital of course. She must have been in an accident of some sort. That would be the reason for the blankness—shock. She knew she had been heavily medicated because she could not read the name plate on the nurse's uniform, even when the woman bent over the bed and her face



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came into the light, expressionless.

It was not at all like the faces of the others who had cared for her during her previous stay in the hospital. There was not about it any of the professional cheeriness or false good nature which went with the chiding. "Now, now, Mrs. Kent. No more tears! Your eyes will be all red when that handsome husband of yours comes in to see you." They had said that and they had said other things which had made no difference, one way or the other. The tearing pain went on destroying her.



This nurse wasn't trying for anything. She merely stared into Rhoda's face and then said, "You are awake, aren't you? They want to talk to you."

Rhoda closed her eyes. She didn't know if she drifted back into unconsciousness for a while or if it was only an instant later when the doctor came. She recognized him for what he was because he was wearing a white jacket, but she didn't know him. He wasn't her doctor.

She and Robert had only one. Some of the crowd had a number of them—an obstetrician, a pediatrician, specialists for various parts of the body. They spoke of them as "men". They said, "A baby man". Or "Our nose and throat man".

Rhoda liked Doctor Paulson and he had called her by her first name on her initial visit to him. He was hearty and sometimes even a little ribald. Where was he now?

She became aware that there was another man in the room. He was not in white and into Rhoda's slowly-functioning mind came the guess that he must be a specialist of some sort. An "accident man"?

They stood there at the side of her bed, the young, balding doctor, and the other man whose face was so weathered and scarred with lines that it looked like a beat-up book cover.

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It was the man in the business suit who asked the questions. He said, "Do you want to tell us about it, Mrs. Kent?"

Tell him about what? The accident? But of course she did not know what had happened, and she felt a harsh throbbing through her head as she tried to think back.

The doctor put a restraining hand on the other man's arm and said, "She'll have to do it easy. Mrs. Kent!" His voice was quiet and gentle. "Go away back. Tell us about your husband."

"My husband . . ."

Robert. Why wasn't he here, too? He had scarcely left her side the other time. He'd been devotion itself, the nurses said. Thoughts of Robert, the kind, the warm, the devoted, formed a tide which swept away her fear of this strange place and these strange people. She began to talk.

It sounded ordinary in the telling. They had been standing near each other at a cocktail party; then neither of them had spoken to another soul for the rest of the afternoon. They had done their courting in Third-Avenue chop houses and bars. Six months after they met, they were married.

New York was no place to bring up a family, and they both wanted children; and so they had moved to Glenview, that commuters' haven for young executives who had not yet reached country-club status. A haven—and for Rhoda—a heaven.

She sighed, "It's so lovely there on Brighton Crescent . . ."

No two houses alike. Each with its three-quarters of an acre and its own individual architectural style. Lawns and small gardens and the double-sized garages for the two cars. But it wasn't just the barrenness of possession which made living on Brighton Crescent such a joy.

"They're so nice! Such happy people!"

They lived on the south end of the Crescent, four couples who came to be known as the crowd. There were the Binghams and the Porters and Ed and Jennie Lawrence and, of course, Rhoda and Robert.

It was the air of joyous spirit which had drawn the young Kents to the other three couples, that aura of delight with life and each other which radiated like a bright and shining emanation from them. There was so much love and laughter and gayety. When she thought of the others, Rhoda saw them smiling, their good, expensively-cared-for teeth showing.

Love—so much of it—but not the careless, unprotected sort of thing it sometimes is between

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friends. Nobody took chances with it for the sake of cheap thrills, either.

There was none of the extra-marital dalliance in Suburbia which has become popular with the novelists. Rhoda tried to explain that precisely, that there were no amorous fumblings around the barbecue pit nor stolen moments in murky places.

If Laura Porter put her hand affectionately on Ed Lawrence's shoulder sometimes, it was because Ed's deft way with a tourniquet had saved her husband's life when Jack slashed an artery with a do-it-yourself tool. Norbert Bingham's special tenderness toward Jenny Lawrence was full of remembrance of the hours she had spent with him in a hospital waiting room while his daughter was being born.

Husbands were in love with their own wives, and they shared with them little private worlds apart from their jobs and their children and the parties, which were only good talk and a few drinks and the pleasure they found in each other's company.

Rhoda had told herself a hundred—no, maybe a thousand—times how lucky she and Robert were to have friends like the Binghams and the Lawrences and the Porters.

The man in the business suit said, "And you had a baby, Mrs. Kent."

The baby . . .

Her head moved restlessly on the pillow, because she was trapped here in the bed with its iron sides and trapped in the memories which flooded over her in a black and ugly surge.

There had been no baby. There had only been bright red, wrenching pain. They had said, all of them who had tried to console her, that it was well it had happened. They had told her that this was Nature's way of removing something which could never grow to be a normal, healthy child. A young student nurse, whose medal swung on its silver chain when she bent to wash Rhoda's body with careful hands, said that God knew best. She brought in a little leaflet with a garishly-colored picture and a prayer printed on it. Rhoda left it in the drawer of the bedside table when she went home.

They were all so kind. There were more parties that winter and the girls in the crowd embarked on a "keep-Rhoda-busy" project. They came in every morning for coffee and they stopped by for her when they went shopping. They made her go with them when they took their children to dancing school or even to the dentists. Whenever there were birthday parties for any

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of the kids, Rhoda had to be there to help serve the ice cream and cake. She became "Auntie Rhoda" and they let her know in a dozen ways how much they loved her.

"They grew up so fast," she murmured.

Now they were dashing down the Crescent to wait for the school bus at the corner. They were bringing home papers with misshapen oranges and apples and bananas colored on them, and going out on Hallowe'en night to trick or treat.

Rhoda kept waiting. She kept asking Doctor Paulson, "But I will some time, won't I?" And he said, "Rhoda, honey, you're a young woman. You've got lots of time."

But she hadn't, because she got to be thirty, and that isn't actually young; and she knew then that the waiting was futile. She knew that she would never have another pregnancy.

The man had a new question. "When did you begin to have trouble with your husband?"

Her eyes flew open. That was a strange question. She and Robert had never had any quarrels or even disagreements. He sometimes became impatient, of course, because she cried so much. But she couldn't help it, especially after the parties when she and Robert returned to the empty house. Or just before he came home at night, when the other girls were busy getting supper for their families.

She tried hard to throw off the spells of depression. Doctor Paulson gave her some pills and she did what she was told so many times to do. She "counted her blessings". Her husband's love, her house, the love of her friends. She found herself trying to warm her cold spirit on the happiness of the others.

"When did you discover that your husband was having an affair with another woman?"

She wanted to cry out in protest, but she could think of no way of not answering the question. She knew that he would stand there, this man with his adamant, stern face and his waiting attitude, until she told him.

It had been six months ago and she had known about it almost the moment it began. Let people say that the wife is the last to find out. That was ridiculous. You know at the very first sign of withdrawal, the first time the kiss is pitying instead of passionate. You see it in the concern in the eyes which you know almost as well as your own. You don't need those silly little bits of drama—the shirt with the lipstick stains on its collar, the love note in the suit that's being sent to the cleaners. You just know, with

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the familiarity of love, every shaded word, every meaning in a glance.

"Affair . . . other woman . . ."

But it was not an affair. It was a falling in love. Rhoda had seen them together one day in Robert's office, he and the little girl from the stenographers' pool. There was no shame in the way they looked at each other, only a rather sad sort of tenderness.

The designation "other woman" was an odd one for Ann Jordan. She was neither a tramp nor a predatory schemer. Actually, she wasn't a woman, being twenty years old to Robert's thirty-three; so it wasn't a middle-aged man's hankering for his lost youth, either.

Ann had a clean and shining look about her. She might have been the parochial school girl who goes back to visit her favorite nun. Or the good, faithful member of the Senior Christian Endeavor Society.

"And so we come to Saturday night . . ."

Rhoda felt her body go rigid at the words. So that's when it had been, Saturday night. Of course. That was the party night and it had been her turn to have the crowd.

She had not let any of them know what had happened to her marriage. She had been forcing herself to believe that things would revert to the way they had been. The advice columns in the newspapers said that if you did not pressure a man, if you were patient and loyal and did not nag, your husband would come back to you after his passion had burned itself out. The wife had everything in her favor, they said. They claimed that there was a chance of making a good marriage out of the wreckage.

So she had coddled her hopes and never mentioned Ann Jordan to anyone in the crowd. When Robert began to spend more and more evenings away from home, returning on the midnight train from the city, she complained lightly about the rush of business which was keeping him working late.

She acted out of hope and out of pride; and, too, because she did not want anything to dim the shining happiness of her friends. They would have ached with sadness for her if they had known about her heartache and had known the real reason for the lonely, dark hours she spent with her imaginings. It had all been for nothing.

He was gone all day Saturday while she scrubbed the house which was already spotless. She had made the sandwiches and covered them with a wet towel and

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put them into the refrigerator. The finger-sized eclairs were on another shelf. The glasses were polished and set in a neat formation on a tray beside the cocktail shaker.

Robert came home in a rush, having left himself barely enough time to shower and change his clothes before the party. But he had enough time to ask her to step into the den with him because he had something to tell her.

He told her there, among the things which he had brought with him from his bachelor apartment: the worn leather chairs and the desk with the chipped surface and the hunting prints which she had always considered repulsive and his collection of guns in a rack on one wall. It was as though he'd had to be among his own things, and not theirs, to find the courage to say what he had to say.

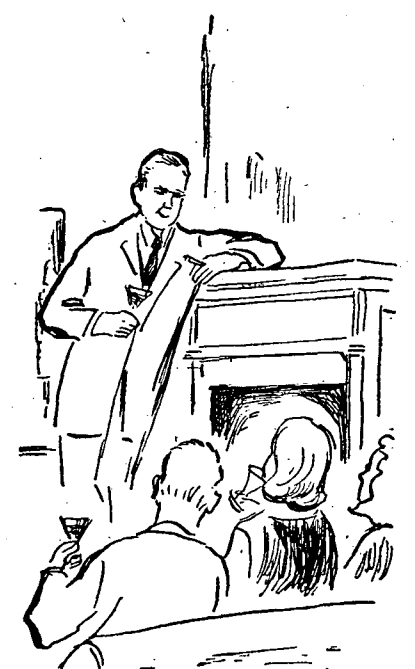
He said, simply, that he and Ann Jordan were in love and that they wanted to marry. He asked Rhoda to divorce him.

"I'm sorry," he finished. "Sorrier than I can say. But that's the way it is."

At that point the bell rang and the first of their guests arrived. The Binghams came in with a tale of their difficulties in obtaining a baby sitter. A few moments later, they were all there, the Lawrences having stopped for the Porters on their way down the same street.

Rhoda did all the things she had to do. She brought in a tray of hors d'oeuvres. She remembered what everyone drank, and she helped Robert with the ice and the bottles and the glasses. She asked about little Billy Porter's cold and how Jenny Lawrence had made out when she went to see small Jenny's teacher.

Everything, so it seemed, was just the same as it was on all the Saturday nights when the crowd got together.



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Rhoda thought that as she stood at the archway of the living room and looked at them sitting there on her chairs and the love seat and the divan. They were smiling, their mouths half-open to reveal the good, well-cared-for teeth. They were just the way they always were in her thoughts about them, gay, smiling, happy to be together.

Robert was standing in front of the fireplace, one hand resting on the mantel, the other holding a glass. He looked handsomer than ever, the planes of his face partly shaded in the half-light, his wide shoulders and narrow hips outlined against the whitewashed brick of the hearth. Rhoda looked at him for a moment.

Then she carried her tray out to the kitchen and put it down carefully on the table. She walked briskly into the den and took two guns from the rack. She took two because she did not know much about guns and she wanted to be sure that one of them, at least, was loaded.

She went back to the archway, braced herself on spread-apart feet, and fired.

The man beside her bed was a detective, of course. She knew that now. He said, "And that was how you killed your husband, Mrs. Kent."

That was how . . . killed him. . . . Dead. Robert was dead. . . . She could see his slumping body now, could see the look of astonishment on his face. The one bullet must have killed him.

But she had gone on firing. She knew that now, too. She'd fired and fired, the guns moving in double arcs until there were only clicking sounds coming from them.

The faces of the others had gone on smiling. Or had they? The lips had been drawn back, but not in smiles, she knew now. Those had been the grimaces of death.

Her voice was a thin squeak rising from her horror.

"All of them?"

The detective's grimness was terrible to hear. "All of them!"

And although he didn't ask her, she told him.

"They were so happy!" she wept.



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TELEVISION COUNTRY

I'M NOT asking you to believe it, you understand. In a way, I don't even want you to. You have no idea how lucky you are if you can't believe it.

Harry and I have to believe it. We have to live with it. We try to. Only Harry flies now, travelling the great wide swing of his territory, especially the round trip to Phoenix and Tucson. It gets him home sooner. Besides which, really you know, it's safer.

And anyhow, I'm not much good with Harry away any more. I haven't been for quite awhile. I get nervous and have strange dreams.

Ever since the trip home from Tucson.

We left about two, after Harry had seen his last dealer. We were both pretty quiet, packing things in the company station wagon. We stood for a moment at the door of the cool impersonal room, which we had personalized, and Harry's arm was tight around my waist.

That moment stands very clear and sharp all by itself in my mind. It was the last of something, of completely peaceful sleep perhaps,

It is one thing to view, with philosophical detachment, from the comfort of an easy chair, the struggles of pioneers pushing ever westward. It is quite another matter to be brought face to face with one aspect of these struggles, stranded in what might well be called "television country".



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or of asking questions which always had logical answers, or of trusting the perimeter of the human mind.

As we drove away from the sprawling place, I could hear splashing in the pool. It seemed strange that it would all go on after we were back home.

The car's broad nose turned toward the north and west. Harry's arm lay across the back of the seat and his fingers touched my shoulder lightly.

"We're going back another way," he said. "They say a new piece of freeway has been opened. Used to be rough and very lonely, but I took it because it's a little shorter."

The road laid itself out long and



By Charlotte Edwards

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slender, slightly bumpy from heavy truck travel, and we were on our way back to California.

If you have ever stretched out a map of the United States, you know how it is. The Eastern half is pale green and yellow, blackened with the printing of hundreds of town and city names. About the beginning of Texas in the south and the Dakotas in the north, the color changes, ripens to orange streaked widely with the purple of mountains, and there aren't enough towns to dim the bright shades. Somehow it gives you the feeling of the hot dry country itself.

We weren't ten miles out of Tucson before I felt the map come alive under us, before us, on either side of us. Empty and wide flung, the desert spread lavishly to rocky hills that weren't quite mountains, that had jagged scalloped tops, that looked two miles away and turned out to be twenty, or forty. The clear pure air distilled the sky with its tatters of silken clouds.

The miles moved sleekly under Harry's good tires. The air conditioning hummed around us. The windows, shut tight, made a compartment as remote from the land as any in a train. Yet, somehow, I was part of it.

Harry didn't talk much, nor did I. It had been a good and perfect thing, this trip together, from the beginning. You see, he travels most of the time. We're not together much, not nearly so much as we would like to be.

Harry and I have a good thing going for us, and have had from the start. We like each other. Every moment shared is precious. But with three teen-aged girls, and his being away so much, those moments squeeze pretty thin sometimes.

So Harry said to me, "Myra, come on, go with me this time. The girls can take care of themselves." He came over and kissed me on the forehead.

You'd think a woman would get used to a little thing like that and not find herself alerted along the nape of her neck, and mush on the edges of her heart.

I looked into his eyes, and they were pleading. He wanted a few days, alone, quiet, with me there to talk it all over with, a swim together, a long slow drink before dinner, dressing up a little and eating at nice places.

Talk about divided loyalties. A woman is like an apple pie. Without supervised cutting, only crumbs are left for the last in the kitchen. Personally, I hide pies and cut Harry's wedge first and biggest. In everything else, though, he seems to get the snips and bits.

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When I began to shake my head, he removed his hand and went back to his chair. I didn't like the way his shoulders looked. Not a bit.

Which is how I happened to go with Harry. It took some doing, and Mrs. Mackintosh down the street to supervise, but off we went, me with a white dacron waltz-length gown and matching peignoir the girls gave me for Mother's Day. It's a ridiculously young outfit, but I knew someday I'd feel ruffly enough to wear it. And I did, in Phoenix and Tucson.

I couldn't remember our first honeymoon, by the time the second one was over. But Harry's hand on my arm from time to time made speech unnecessary.

We stopped in a little town called Casa Grande, where Harry always visited a faded cafe for coconut cream pie. Such a pie I shall never taste again, unless we walk into the same restaurant in the same town.

But nothing could force me to do that, of course. Nothing, or nobody or ever.

It was so hot that we were both dappled with moisture when we got back to the car.

"This is the long haul to Yuma," Harry said. The pie and coffee seemed to have restored him. "There's only the next town of Gila Bend, and then it's all empty desert."

I looked around. It was beginning to be just that. "How could they bear it? How did they ever get across down here?

"That's a good question," Harry agreed.

My gaze went back, hypnotized, to the window. It looked familiar, in patches. Then I realized why.

"This is television country," I cried.

"Indian country," Harry corrected. "Arizona still has more Indians than all the other states together."

He swung his arm toward the bushes that studded the sand. "Mesquite."

"My goodness," I reacted. It was the last phrase I spoke for a long time.

This thing began to happen to me. I began to get the feeling of history underneath me. I felt history and loneliness, panic and terror, courage and grief, spreading out from either side of me. I looked up at the sun, which defied the spattered clouds. I thought of how quickly my arms and legs had turned red, then brown, in five short days. I thought of five days on the desert instead of our ten air-conditioned hours. I watched the forests of tall cactus, weirdly shaped, like one long

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pointing finger surrounded by a clenched fist. I watched the strange hard mountains in the distance, and counted up their infinite layers of rock and shale as the road wound through the nearer hills. I shivered and was suddenly giddy.

"I can turn this down if it's too cold." Harry reached toward the air button.

I shook my head. Quite suddenly the narrow road divided, grew broad and became a freeway. The car purred with pleasure and Harry said, "Ah, that's better."

We went through the little town of Gila Bend on a breath. The houses, stores, all except the gas stations, were dun and washed out, dried like bones.

Then we were alone again, Harry and Myra, alone as we hadn't been even in the motel. Alone in a sort of backward immortality, as if we were once again in the age of our ancestors, who came this way and made a place for us in California. I wished that I had asked my grandmother more questions about her parents. Or that somebody had written it all down in the family Bible.

"The thing you have to be careful of," Harry volunteered cheerfully after a long silence, "Is that they mean what they say on those 'Soft Shoulders, Sand' signs. You see, if you get off the rim of the road, two things can happen. Either the sand catches your wheels and you roll over and over in the mesquite—"

"Harry, really," I protested.

"Well," he argued defensively, "It's so. Or else it throws you out of control and you go skidding across the freeway and smack into a car coming the other way."

There weren't, I realized, many cars coming the other way. Harry was right. This was a very lonely way home. "I'm not going to get a night's sleep when you're gone from now on," I said lightly.

As they say in old fashioned books, little did I know.

He laughed: "Forewarned is forearmed, honey," he comforted. "See, I stay in the fast lane. Only one kind of soft shoulders I'm not afraid of." He patted them.

"It would be awful just to get stuck," I volunteered moodily.

We had stayed at the motel until the last minute of the sign-out time. Now it was beginning to get dusky around us. Not a fast dusk, laying itself smooth in purple, just a haze, like fog, beginning at the very top of the farthest hills and letting itself down carefully, an inch at a time, toward the earth.

My eyes were on the sky one moment, then on the road the next.

"Harry," I screamed, "Look out!"

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Harry's arm was off the back of the seat, his two hands were struggling with the wheel, his leg was a slamming force against his ankle and foot on the brake. The screech seemed to fill the world. The woven rubber feeling of the car was fluid and sickening.

We careened from the fast lane into a semi-circle, careened back from the center, wheels grinding on the right side in the sand of the soft shoulder of the road.

I waited in utter calmness for us to roll over and over into the mesquite. But we didn't. Harry had managed to stop the car.

His anger was louder than the air conditioner. "What the hell," he yelled, "did you scream like that for?"

"You almost hit him," I cried. "The old man in the middle of the road. You were headed right for him."

"What old man? I didn't see any old man." Harry opened the door on his side and stepped out. He peered back down the road. "I don't see any old man," he insisted.

He stomped around the car. The right rear wheel was deep in the sand. I knew it before he called the knowledge to me, unbalanced as we were.

I jumped out, glanced quickly both ways, and ran back down the empty road to the old man. He stood there, not two feet from where I had first seen him. He looked dazed and worried, as well he might after such a close call.

"Thank God we missed you," I threw at him, running, getting to him, trying to see if he was hurt in any way.

He swung around to stare toward me. I stopped short, aware of the late afternoon heat which somehow seemed to have gotten into my heart and had set it steaming and bubbling like a kettle.

It was television country, all right, I thought distractedly, and this old boy was right out of the small screen in the living room. A thick patina of sandy dust lay all over him. Under it I made out an old flat hat, rags of brown clothes, a bag on his shoulder on which was hitched a heavy pick and shovel. I peered closer, ignoring my heart, ready to yell for Harry, and looked at his face.

Did I say the houses of Gila Bend were dun and dried bones? I knew nothing. This old face was dun and dried bones, with a skimpy white beard too tired to fly in any wind. Buried somewhere under the shadow of the hat brim, under the dirt and sharp eyebrows, were old eyes I could only sense, and weariness which came out from them in waves.

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"You must be almost in shock," I found myself saying. "Come along with me. The car is cool. And we have some ginger ale. Sit awhile, until my husband digs us out, and then we can take you where you're going."

"You headed for Mexico?" His voice was faint in the stillness, far away, as weary as his eyes.

"No," I said. I remembered that Harry had told me that to our left, the south, it wasn't far to the border, and that up ahead there was a turn, beyond Yuma, at Calexico, where you could almost step across the line.

Harry called, his voice sharp in all the sudden silence, loud in contrast to the old man's. "Hey, Myra, give me a hand. Myra."

He was bent over the back fender, pushing against the heavy resisting sand. I knew, somehow, that he hadn't seen me leave the car, that he thought I was still in there, air-conditioned and waiting.

I reached one hand toward the old man. "Come on," I coaxed softly, the way I used to handle the middle girl, the shy one. "Come on and get cool, and have something to drink."

He moved with a dry shuffle, as if all the juice were out of his joints, and very very slowly. I matched my steps to his, a little ahead of him, my eyes on the road to see that tragedy didn't come roaring at us, as it so nearly had.

We were beside the car when Harry looked up. "Isn't it enough," he said fiercely, "That you go suddenly berserk and get us into this fix without—" He looked beyond me. His mouth and cheeks and eyebrows went lax all in one movement. "For the love of God," he whispered.

"He was there, you see, Harry," I said with pure reason. "You must have been blinded by the sun, or looking off at an angle—because there he was, Harry, right in the middle of the freeway—" It hit me, the enormity of it. I shivered a little.

"You can use my shovel," the dry old voice walked its great distance, "If'n you want. But not my pick. I gotta use my pick when I find my water hole." He reached creakily back to his pack. He put two thin veined hands around the handle. The skin of his wrists was etched deep on the bones, burned red as blood. He pulled the shovel free, and heaved it, missing Harry by inches.

"Hey!" Harry cried. Some of the color came back into his face.

The old man wasn't looking at Harry. He stared at the car. He shook his head and closed his eyes and opened them again. "Still there," he muttered.

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I opened the back door. "Get in," I offered. "Rest a little."

He backed away from me. He shook his head fiercely. "Not me. If'n you'll just finish with my shovel. I got to find my water hole. I been lookin' and lookin'. It's gotta be here. It should be here. I can't rest easy till I find my water hole."

Harry said sharply, "Myra, get in the car."

I stared at him.

"Do as I tell you," he commanded. Any authority he'd shown was minor compared to his total maleness. "Shut the door and lock it. Lock all of them."

I went close to him. "He's just a tired old man, Harry," I whispered. "He must have walked miles. We haven't passed a town in hours. He's a—a prospector or something—" It sounded as if I were begging.

Harry said, "Get—in—the—car!"

He began to dig rapidly. I minded him. Like one of the girls, having to take an order without explanation, I obeyed my husband. But once inside, I reached for a bottle of ginger ale and the opener, then I ran down the window and held the foaming stuff toward the old man.

"Myra," Harry called warningly. His shovel moved with deep precision, loud and scratching, fast, straining, racing to the finish.

The old man hesitated, then he moved in that strange bony way toward me. I held the bottle out as far as I could, so that he wouldn't have to touch me.

He took it. He put it to his cracked lips. His Adam's apple raised and dropped twice. Then he spat the fuzzy stuff, away from me, toward the highway, lifted the bottle high and threw it with a crash to the nice new freeway pavement.

"Gahh," he choked.

I pulled myself back into the car.

"I gotta find my water hole," he muttered, making a sing-song affair of it now. "I can't rest easy till I find my water hole. All them years, baking, baking, stone ovens, baking, no water like my water hole, can't rest easy."

Harry came around the side of the car. He was soaked and patched with sweat, and the shovel swung heavy in his hand.

"Here we are, Old Timer," he cried. It sounded like TV again. But there was something false and too hearty in Harry's voice, something strange and young and frightened. "Thanks. Those pebbles ought to do it." He paused. "No water holes around here," he added.

The old man took his time about reaching for the shovel and fas-

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tening it back in place. "Lot you'd know," he breathed thinly.

Harry pulled a handkerchief, very white in the slow-pushed dusk, from his back pocket and worked it over his soiled and perspiring face. "Where you from?" he asked the old man.

We both saw it, I know we did. The shadowed eyes pinched and turned sly. "Ain't from Yuma," the voice was defiant. "Ain't never been to Yuma. Never. Whole life."

"We're going that way," Harry said. I knew it was against his will and better judgment. I knew it was his good heart, and his feeling of guilt for not seeing the old man in the first place. "Thanks for your shovel, we're ready to head on. Want a lift?"

It happened then. The old man stood a foot taller, his eyes went wild with fear and rage. His thin hands knotted into fists, and the burned wrists were livid. His mouth turned to a gray vacancy.

"No, you don't," he shrilled, high, like an animal. "You don't get me back there again. Not you nor no man's army. Yuma." The word came out like spit in the air. "I gotta find my water hole. My own good pure water from my own water hole. Nobody's goin' to shut me up in that filth again. Them caves. Bake ovens. I dreamed my water hole. I can't rest easy until—you don't get me back there. Not ever."

He reached upward, strong and strangely young. The pick was in his hand with the suddenness of a quick drawn gun. "Now git," he shouted. "Git, both of you, whoever you are and wherever you're from. Leave me be to find my water hole or I'll rip the two of you into long strips of meat."

Harry was in the car before I could open my mouth to scream. The motor turned at once, praise new cars. The rear wheel slashed a few empty rounds, then took hold. We skidded out onto the pavement.

Not so fast though, that we couldn't hear the harsh clank of the pick against the left back fender, and the harsh uplifted shriek of the old man.

"I can't rest easy," he ranted. "I can't rest easy."

I heard him twice, somewhere in the midst of my shuddering, before the sound of the motor and the blessed hum of the air conditioner drowned him from my ears.

Harry's hands on the wheel were shaking. "Crazy old coot," he muttered. "Nutty old fool. Walking the freeways looking for water."

I started to cry. I cried for quite awhile and Harry didn't say a word to stop me. If he'd been a

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woman I'm sure he would have done the same thing, instead of just drawing long breaths on his cigarette and swearing under them.

When we neared Yuma, Harry spoke for the first time. "There's a sign on the edge of town I've noticed before." He sounded calm and himself again. "It points the way to the Territorial Prison. I think we'd just better stop off there and tell the authorities about that guy."

"You think he was an escaped prisoner?" I asked. Crazy, yes. Driven mad from the sun, I'd thought. But a prisoner?

Harry nodded. "Add it up."

We rode in silence, following the green sign. We went through streets which were just turning on lights in the brown twilight. We swung to a dead end, and crossed a series of railroad tracks. We lifted up a sharp hill and around a curve.

Yuma Territorial Prison was spread out before us at the top of the hill.

It was our fault, of course, for not knowing more about Arizona history. California, sure. But not Arizona.

Yuma Territorial Prison—AND Museum! 1825.

Adobe, old rocks, broken down walls. Sun burned brick. Crumbling. Hanging on. It was every television Western, every sheriff who fought to get the prisoner to the Territorial Prison before a gang could lynch him.

Tragic. Horrible. Man's inhumanity to man. The tiny dug out cells, chipped from the heavy rock hill. Great rusted crossed bars before them. Great rusted rings to manacle men, set in the center of them.

"Caves," the old man had cried. "Filth. Ovens," he had shrilled with those blood red wrists raised high.

I was ill. I was very ill.

Suddenly and completely all history was in me. The place where I stood, the old yard, dirt packed to stone by other feet, the yard where a hundred years ago men took their pathetic limited exercise and yearned out over the green country. Because it was green, even in the twilight, the land below was rich and green, watered by the silver thread of the Colorado river. History climbed up into my legs and feebled them, and went on into my stomach and nauseated it, and caught my heart and squeezed it dry.

It was the same with Harry. We stood there, the two of us, Myra and Harry on a second honeymoon, and for a long time we were too weak to walk back to

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the car. We were too gone in the past to think of the old man.

It was only when we were once again down the hill, moving very slowly because the steering wheel looked big and dangerous in Harry's trembling hands, once more across the railroad tracks, that we thought of him and looked at each other.

You have to be married quite awhile to share a strong thought, a question, an answer, and agree without words, the way we did. Harry picked up speed, swung the car out of Yuma, and began to retrace the distance back to the spot where the old man had been so shockingly and suddenly in the middle of the freeway.

It turned dark all at once, as if somebody had snapped a switch off in a bright room. I suppose there were stars, but we didn't see them. Perhaps there was a moon, but it gave us no light. All we saw, the two of us, straining our eyes, was the road, black and wide, in the modern beam of our headlights, unreeling like film, roll after roll of it, black, shiny, full of miles.

"We have to find out," Harry said, some time, any time, a long time. "We have to try to find him."

"Yes," I breathed. "Yes."

I don't remember how long it was. Years of night and road and the motor all seemed to push against dead air. We slowed at last, caught by the familiar shape of a hill, the one beside which the car had skidded and lashed into the sand.

We slowed for another reason, too.

On the opposite side of the freeway red and white blinker lights flashed in crazy syncopation. As we drew closer, going very gently now, we saw yellow barricades, thrown up rapidly, haphazard. A spotlighted sign read "Slow. Detour."

Harry parked at the side of the road, careful to stay off the sand, yet give maximum passing space. He kept the lights on. He opened the door and signalled me out. He took my hand. We ran across the road, across the narrow center divider and to the detour sign, the busy reflectors flashing their warning.

There was a police car at the far side. The officer called, "What do you want?"

I could almost hear Harry swallow. "The old man," he cried thickly. "Was he hit? What happened here?"

The officer came into the aura of the reflectors, his face mottled a flashing red and white. "Don't know anything about any old man. Damndest thing, though.

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Look at it and see for yourselves."

The barricades were a neat fence, framing a large chipped hole in the freeway. The hole wasn't neat, though. It was ragged, as though it had been worked at in frenzied haste. It gaped in the nice new pavement like a great tear in the seat of a new pair of pants.

And filling it, brimming it, cupping it, shimmering in the red and white lights, was a clear shining pool of water!

We turned, not caring what the officer thought. We ran, still hand in hand, two utterly terrified children in a night too big and dark for us, a land too spread and wild. We ran toward the security of our modern, sensible, air-conditioned, motorized world.

Just before we reached the car, Harry stumbled, fell to one knee, caught himself, and came up with something in his hand.

It was a pick, ancient and rusty and very efficient. It was damp on the edges from water finally discovered.

After how many years? Oh heaven, after how long a time?

"I can't rest until I find my water hole."

Harry's arm stretched high and frantic. He threw the pick with all of his strength toward the unseen mesquite bushes.

"I can't rest until I find my water hole."

All right, as I said before, you don't have to believe it. You're lucky if you can't.

Maybe Harry and I would be lucky, too, in time. They say all experiences dim, and a sensible explanation can be made for almost anything.

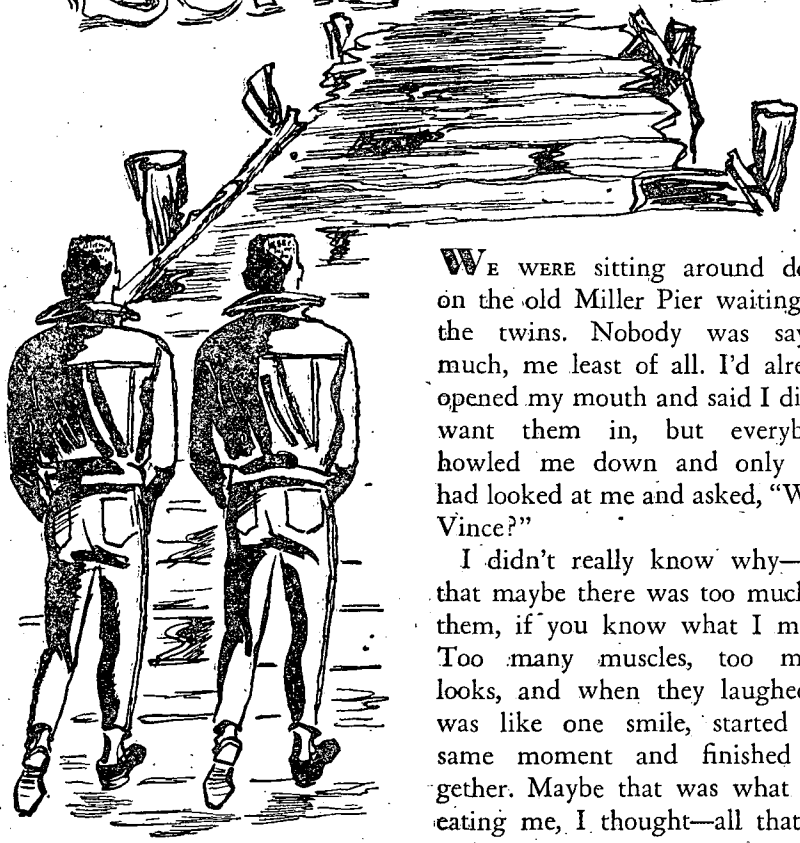
But we have to live with it.

You see, the best mechanics in town, or in the city, cannot seem to straighten out the sharp narrow gouge in the center of the left rear fender of Harry's company station wagon.



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SOMETHING



WE WERE sitting around down on the old Miller Pier waiting for the twins. Nobody was saying much, me least of all. I'd already opened my mouth and said I didn't want them in, but everybody howled me down and only Jess had looked at me and asked, "Why, Vince?"

I didn't really know why—just that maybe there was too much of them, if you know what I mean. Too many muscles, too much looks, and when they laughed it was like one smile, started the same moment and finished together. Maybe that was what was eating me, I thought—all that togetherness.

In the Middle Ages, when knighthood was in flower (they say), men proved their valor, physical prowess and endurance, in tournaments, always before an audience. What we have here is an endurance contest in quite another setting, and for other reasons.

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So I just sat there, my back up against a piling, staring down at the water where it slapped, black and oily, against the shoring and I kept wishing they wouldn't make it. Maybe the clerk would spot them lifting the gun, or they wouldn't get it out of the glass case or the fuzz would look them over and ask questions. Then everybody would see they were all mouth and they didn't belong in a club like ours.

You see, we're something special—kinda like the inner circle of a big wheel. Outwards we're one of those 'social clubs'; you know the kind, 'to keep the boys off the streets', and we have 'sponsors' and 'outings' and 'Friday dances' and all that jazz, but inside, well, we're like the prize in a box of crackerjack. We're what give it the kicks, man, and the name the rest of them whisper when they think we're not listening.



Tonight, we were testing the twins. We'd been watching them ever since Manny said they wanted in. And when I say watching, I'm not just talkin'. There isn't anything escapes us—the talk, the act, the dress, the thinkin', the chicks they pick. Because we don't want any flash. We want 'em solid—hard solid.

We'd told them to meet us down at the end of Miller's Pier. It's an old, condemned hunk of pilings, sticking way out in the water, and we always come here because it's like the end of nowhere—no lights, no people, no law—just us and the water underneath, swishing in soft and slow, or else, like tonight, pounding and shaking the pilings until they creaked, loose and uneasy.

We'd got here ahead of the twins and we'd opened the first case of beer and somebody had put on a stack of records and the music was

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beating, sweet and hot, and we just sat there, waitin'.

Dave spotted them first, walking down the pier towards us—their steps swinging together—the same height, the same charcoal jackets, the same black loafers, and I never been so restless in my life. It was just like I ached all over.

"They're sure big cats," Manny says. "Suppose we'll make them purr?"

"If we don't," I answer, "I got some special catnip." Everybody laughs.

We let 'em walk almost up to us and then Jess calls out, "Hold it!"

They stop and somebody reaches over and turns the music way down. When it gets real quiet, Jess rolls over and sits up. We always let him start the talkin', because he's a big name at school and he's got that smooth, slick cover. But underneath, he's squirrelly, and a mean cat when he's charged up.

Right now, he looks quiet and easy and his voice just slides out. "Somebody passed the word, you two want in."

One of them gives a short nod.

Jess looks around at us and kinda grins. "It ain't easy. Ask Davey here—took him three times."

Somebody snickers and Jess' voice gets smoother. "'Course Davey's gift *was* extra special." He stops a minute, like he's studying the twins. "You do know you're supposed to bring a gift, don't you?"

They shake their heads.

Jess acts real surprised. "You don't! Well, I'll clue you in. It's to show your appreciation. Nothin' big, just something for the club. Like Manny. He brought us a very nice Hi Fi; and Roberto, over there, lifted—pardon me—contributed a case of champagne; and Vince—" he turns and nods at me. "Well, Vince showed real imagination. He brought us a song-and-dance team—for an evening."

Everybody howls. But I watch the twins. They don't even smile, they just stand there watchin' first me and then Jess.

Finally, Dave pokes me. "What's with these two," he whispers. "They ain't for real."

But I don't answer. They're real enough, I think. To some people, the Devil ain't real.

I look back at Jess. He's still talkin', his words comin' out slow and careful like he's hand picking each one. "We got your gift all selected. We need somethin' to go hunting with—somethin' like that hand-tooled Weatherby rifle down in Dyman's gun shop."

We all look sharp at the twins

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and you can see this rocks them a little. But it don't show much of anywhere except in their eyes. I'll swear they slitted down like a cat's.

Jess moves his hand stretching his fingers. "You understand of course, there's no money involved. "Just brains and slick fingers."

The twins take a quick look at each other and then they start to wheel away when Davey yells, "Hey, don't they get the treatment?"

And Jess kinda smiles and says, "Ah, yes, the treatment!"

We all sit up then and start poundin' on the pier and you can feel the drummin' movin' through the old wooden planks and right up your spine. And pretty soon, Jess raises his hands and we quiet down. Then he crooks his finger at the twins and he points out a spot inside our circle and they walk forward and stand there.

"You know the rules for this?" Jess asks.

"We heard." One of them answers, short-like.

Jess turns his head and looks around our circle. "You first, Manny."

Manny snickers, "Which of you is the biggest stud?"

And it begins.

I take a beer and stretch out. It's gonna be the usual—love life, sex life, secret life. A question or a challenge to each of us, and they got to answer fast and straight.

I take a long swallow and I look at the twins, just standing there, their heads turning slow and their eyes watchin', cold and steady. And no matter what anybody asks, they give back good as they get and sometimes better.

Until it seems I'm burnin' all over and I can't hardly wait till it's my turn. When it comes, I stand up and everybody quiets down. They know *I'm* not askin' any question. I stand still a minute just lookin' at the twins and then I put my hand down and snap my fingers and Dave puts another beer in my palm. I tip the can up and I chug-a-lug it and then I say:

"You two are pretty close, aren't you? Same schedule, same teachers, same friends. You drive the same car, eat together, date together— Scrub your teeth together?"

Everybody hoots on that one and the twins pivot towards me like I'd touched a hidden switch.

"That's nice." I take my time, drawing it out. "Nothing like brotherly love—except in this club. Here, it's everybody for everybody, but no more for one than the other —get it?"

Their heads move up and down, slow.

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I drink the last of the beer and I'm feeling good now. "Okay. Just to prove that to all of us, suppose Kennie throws Dennie off the pier!"

For a minute it's so quiet, I can hear my own breathin' and then Jess snickers and Davey follows him and Manny and then they're all howlin' and banging on the wooden planks and I have to raise my arms to shut them off. But nobody says anything 'cause I'd made the challenge and only I could withdraw it. I hold up my arms until everyone settles down and I keep them up until we can hear the water rollin' in under us, sloshing up against the pilings.

Then one of the twins takes a half step towards me but the other one touches him and he stops. His words come out flat and mean sounding. "Okay! But suppose *you* pick Dennie. And if you're right, he goes in the water. But if you're wrong—*you* go in!"

They had me there. And everybody knew it. 'Cause who in hell could separate these two? I look past them—out into the night. I'd dove off this pier before but it was daylight and you could see the water and there was no tide like tonight. Get thrown against these pilings by a wave and the barnacles would shred you like a cheese grater.

I look back at the twins and the same face, duplicated, watches me. There just wasn't any real way of knowin' who was who, so I draw a breath and take the face to the left.

"You're Dennie," I say. And I'm lucky.

They wait a few seconds and then they move together towards the edge of the pier. The rest of us follow.

Dennie sits down and slips off his shoes and Kennie looks over the side. "It's fifteen feet down," he says. "Tide's in and fast, moving against the pier." He stops, looks down at his brother. "Let's make it from the other side."

I wait until Dennie starts to stand up and I put my hand out. "Easy," I say, "I made the challenge. I make the rules. He goes over *this* side."

Kennie's face kinda flattens down. "The tide's runnin' this way. He'll get washed into the pilings!"

I shrug. "So? You want in this club or don't you?"

He looks away from me and back out at the water. Dennie starts shedding his pants and pretty soon, he's stripped down and he steps to the edge and stands there, just waitin'. Kennie puts a hand on him.

"Dive shallow and swim hard

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to the right." Then he's quiet a moment, looking down at the water and suddenly he says, "Now!", and Dennie's over in a sweet, clean dive.

We all crowd to the edge staring out into the blackness and you can't see much except the top of the water, movin' big and restless out beyond you. And then Kennie gives a long, sharp whistle. And somewhere out in the water comes an answer.

Davey tugs at me "How're we gonna get him up?" he asks.

And I see everyone is watchin' me and mainly the twin, only his eyes don't look right. But I figure nothin's gonna shake me on this one, so I look him straight in the face and I say, "He's such a big cat, let him swim to shore."

He just looks at me and then he gives another whistle that kinda upends a little like it asked a question. And then we hear the answer—a little fainter and ahead of us—and Kennie looks back at me and says,

"Don't go away—we'll be back with your present."

And he starts walkin' towards the shore. Only he stays right at the edge of the pier and ever so often he gives another whistle and then he waits until he gets an answer. They keep going like that until we don't hear them anymore and we know they've reached the shore.

And Manny says, "Ain't *that* somethin'. Did ya ever see anything neater?"

And everybody starts talkin' at once, but I go over and get myself a beer and I stretch out flat on the wooden floor, away from everyone. And I can hear the water boilin' in under me and it sounds like it was laughin' to itself and all of a sudden I wished I could get up and run like hell right down that pier.

Only Roberto turned the phonograph up real loud and someone passed around a bottle of bourbon and I took the biggest swallow I could and Jess looked over at me and started laughin'. I got up and walked over to where he was sittin' and I handed the bottle to him.

"Go on, laugh!" I said. "But if we had a brain between all of us, we wouldn't be here when they get back."

He upends the bottle and he takes a fat swallow and then he grins that squirrelly grin and says, "Those cats sure got to you. Relax, man, maybe they won't even get back with the gun."

"They'll be back," I said. I went over and looked down at the water and it was higher and blacker than before and I thought, "One big wave and this whole pile of lumber

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will go down right underneath it."

I wondered how it would be down in the water with the salt in your mouth and your eyes and the waves beating over you and pretty soon I'm shaking so hard I gotta sit down. And then it was like I knew—. I took my shoes off and my jacket and I checked the zipper on my pants so it wouldn't hang up and I looked around at the other guys and I wanted to run to each one and holler, "Let's get the hell outa here!" But I knew it wouldn't do any good so I just sat there, real quiet, because who can tell the world the end is coming?

I guess maybe I heard them first. It was like their walkin' was swayin' the pier even more and everybody quieted down and we just watched them coming, pulling somethin' big and heavy lookin' between them.

Davey edges towards me and grabs my shirt. "What they got with them, Vince?" he asks and I have to look at him 'cause his voice sounds thin and strange.

"Nothin'," I say. "Just a box. Probably chickened out on the gun and they're bringing a crate of liquor to soften us up."

Then Manny snickers, "Looks like a crate on wheels. Suppose they caught themselves a chorus girl?" And everybody laughs, but not easy, like usual.

The twins stop about twenty feet away and we can see what they're pulling really good. It's big and solid looking with a door in front, only you can't see inside.

Nobody says a word, waiting for Jess. He takes a step forward and jerks a thumb at the box. "I thought we sent you after a gun!"

One of them leans down and lifts something off the top of the crate and tosses it to Jess and he catches it and looks carefully at it and then he holds it up and we all crowd close and sure enough, it's the rifle. It's so black and shining everyone kinda puts their hands out and we pass it around and holding it is really somethin'. Then Jess takes it back and he opens the breech and he looks at the twins and says, "It's empty."

They shrug and one of them says, "You didn't ask for shells."

Jess waits a long minute and then he holds the gun out in front of him and he looks around at all of us and everybody nods their heads except me. But there ain't nothin' now I can say, so I just shut up and Jess turns back to the twins and says, "Okay. You're in."

They look at each other and they kinda move a bit like they're relaxing and then one of them smiles and says, "Which one?"

Jess looks surprised. "What d'ya mean—which one?"

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And now the twin is really grinnin'. "Well, seeing that there's two of us and someone might object to our bringing just one gift—we brought two. Something more for the club—like you said, and especially for Vince." And he leans forward and grabs the handle of the crate's door and he gives it a quick tug and then he jumps back and then both of them turn and run like hell up the pier.

Only nobody is watching them too close. 'Cause the door was swinging open and somethin' comes out of the blackness of that cage like it's unfolding itself.

And Davey grabs me and hollers, his voice real high, "It's a cat!"

And it's a cat all right—only it's big and yellow and spotted and it moves towards us, sleek and fast, its head forward and its mouth open, snarling.

At first, it was like we were frozen and then everybody moves at once, pushing and shoving and yelling, with that cat weaving back and forth, till everyone is running like a big wave, first one side of the pier and then the other. And the pier begins shaking and twisting and I tried to get to the edge so I could dive clear but I began slipping and sliding and it was just like the water reached up and took all of us. Only just before I went down, I hear a whistle, sharp and clean, but I knew it wasn't for us.

Only Jess and I made it to shore. It was a week before they found all the others and the papers played it big on how the whole club had gone night fishing and the pier had collapsed and everything. Jess and I never told anybody different and neither did they.

Sure, we see them. They're the big names around here, now. They got their own club and they get the sharpest chicks and everytime they pass us driving their convertible, that big, yellow, spotted, tame ocelot riding in the back seat, turns and looks at us. And it really gets to you. Know what I mean?



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RESPECTABLE people were more resentful of Samuel Hollister than shocked at his crime. In appearance and reputation, he was so much one of them that his deed represented an insufferable betrayal.

"He was just as likable a fellow as you'd ever want to meet," teacher Ralph Phillips told a reporter. Even his wife, to whom Hollister had been married for twenty-three years, came out of a state of hysterical shock repeating that it was all quite impossible.

Hollister was a small, neat man with an overly large head sprinkled with thinning hair the color of wheat germ. His face was round, sallow in winter, a splotchy pink in summer. Whenever he saw anyone, his rather thin mouth always smiled a little and crinkles appeared in the corners of his eyes.

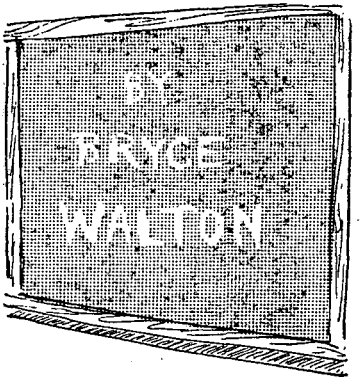


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Until we are equipped with X-ray eyes, which will enable us to read the mind of our neighbor, mankind will always be shocked by one another's behaviour. Perhaps it is just as well, for without an occasional shock life would be dull indeed.

"He was such a sweet man," a woman said.

"I don't know that he had an enemy in the whole county, or in the whole state," said school caretaker Ray Bardon.



Hollister had been a respected principal of Leland High School for sixteen years. His success had resulted from a plodding efficiency, a rigid adherence to time-tested rules, rather than any imaginative boldness. Bland and self-effacing, he got results by a sort of timid indirection. He never lost his temper or raised his voice, but managed to exact discipline by looking sad and reproachful, as though he had expected much and was deeply hurt at being disappointed or betrayed.

He was superintendent of the First Baptist Church and taught Sunday school there. As a boy he had been known as nice, eager to please, scorned by his more obstreperous contemporaries, but appreciated by adults. Having been born and raised in Lakeville, Hollister had no gaps in his past. There had never been a hint in his actions of a repudiation of his background. His exposure as a monster tended then to create the suspicion that anyone might carry on sordid secret extra-marital affairs, not to mention carrying out the most gruesome and calculated murders.

Perhaps respectable people resented most the equanimity, the mundane business-as-usual attitude of Hollister during those hours immediately preceding the deed. For the day he murdered Miss Louella Prentz seemed to have gone along for Samuel Hollister as though it were simply another Thursday, and promised nothing unusual.

He approved the latest edition

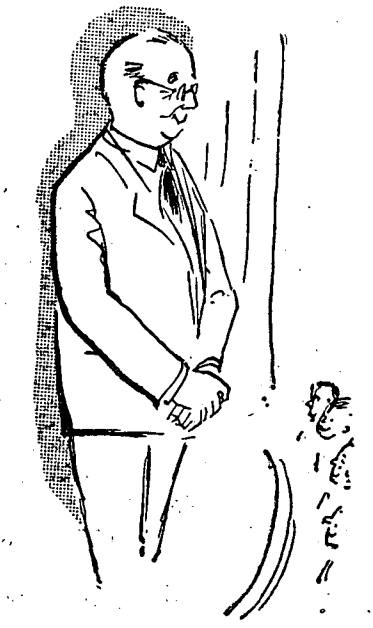
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of the Lakeville High Times. He sentenced two boys (but lightly for one of them was the son of a banker) for smoking in the furnace room. He conducted regular daily inspection of classes and even paused in Burke's world geography class to drop a comment regarding the problem of increasing crop yields in Latin America.

Once his ingenuous pink face appeared, like a bland balloon, before the study hall assembly. He delivered an unimaginative but apparently sincere peptalk in honor of the basketball game. The students laughed dutifully at his usual square but well-intentioned jokes. Even the ill-fated Miss Prentz who sat with her English class inside her angular tweedy shell, gave a secretively possessive smile to the man who had made love to her, the man who would, at five o'clock that very afternoon, begin the systematic disposal of her, down to her very bones.

Pity and sympathy for Miss Louella Prentz as victim was to vaporize at once following exposure of her adulterous relationship with Hollister. Respectable people seemed to have considered her a deliberate partner in Hollister's plot to disrupt faith in middle-class decency. For if ever a woman assured in manner and dress a pure dedication to the chastity imposed upon her by profession and Lakeville law, that woman was Miss Louella Prentz.

We must sympathize with the public's inability to accept as credible a *crime passionel* between these two. Miss Prentz, quoting romantic poetry and Idylls of the King once shared only by unappreciative students, might have felt the possibility of dreams coming true. But Hollister had simply been inexplicably drawn into a sticky mess. It had just happened, that was all, during their chaperoning of a class picnic last Spring. Hollister was shocked, astonished at first by a flash of unleashed bold-



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ness in himself. He was even more astonished by Louella's impassioned reaction. But he felt guilty. It was improper. He expected the affair to go away, dissolve harmlessly like a dream. But Louella was persistent. It didn't go away. Intimidated by a life's habitual role of the self-effacing nice guy, Hollister was unable to dissolve it until it was too late to do anything but dissolve it—completely.

Hollister made repeated timid efforts to stop these embarrassing and threatening liaisons. Meetings remained secret only by thinnest chance. He knew they couldn't be lucky for long. He found himself helplessly mired in a thickening nightmare of being discovered, exposed, utterly ruined. Yet, he would have gone on with the risk, for he considered himself incapable of hurting anyone, especially the lonely and hungry Louella.

But three weeks before the murder, she forced his hand.

They had met after school in the storage room just off of the science lab. It was a more than usually strained moment, then Louella began to sob. She had sobbed before but never like this.

"We can't go on like this, Sam," she said.

Dim light through the one sooty window reflected vaguely on dusty retorts, bunsen burners, spare microscopes, aisles of cartons, papers, books, and on shelves of bottled chemicals.

Hollister felt a flood of grateful



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relief because Louella had finally made the decision he could not make. Deeply touched, he said, "I guess we can't. But we'll always have the memory of—"

He had started to put his arm around her, but she jerked away. He was startled by the look of damp hostility on her face.

"I don't mean that, Sam. I'll never give you up."

She put her hands over her face. Her body shivered as she sobbed, louder and with breaking anguish.

"I don't understand," Hollister said, genuinely puzzled. He was peering at her suddenly with a kind of wariness. "You said we can't go on like this. We can't. We'll be found out, and—"

"You'll get a divorce, Sam. You'll divorce her and marry me!"

He shook his head slowly and his extended arm drew away from her. Stunned, he asked in a dull tone if she knew what she was saying.

"I have a right to a marriage, a home and children and love like other women. You can't go on using me for your pleasure, then go back to *her!* I won't have it anymore." Her voice rose higher.

"Someone will hear us," Hollister said in a shaky voice. Inside him was a deep inner disturbance he shrank from defining.

"I don't care now. I want them to. I want everyone to know."

"Please, Louella." He looked at her a moment, then said almost gently. "This won't do, will it, dear. I'd never realized you felt—like that about it."

"Hadn't you?" she said bitterly.

"Well, I—" he stopped helplessly.

"Well what?"

"That's—it isn't possible," he said.

"Yes it is." She wasn't sobbing now. Suddenly she was cold, implacably threatening. He stepped away from her in a kind of fear. She was someone he had never really seen before. He bumped into shelves, and bottles made an icy ting that scraped his bones. "You divorce her, Sam. I mean it. I've waited, hoping, but you never would have the nerve to do what's right."

"But I had no idea—" His voice faltered. His hands were trembling slightly, but a kind of smile stayed on his face. "Louella, let me work this out now. Let me think. I'll figure something."

"You'll do what's right. There's only one thing that's right. Divorce her. You start divorce proceedings right now, Sam."

"But," he said dully, "it would all come out anyway. I'd be ruined."

"What about me?"

"You never led me to believe

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that you expected anything like this."

"You didn't want to believe it. You're not what people think. You're selfish. But you can't just use me anymore."

"All right. I'll see what I can do."

"You start getting a divorce right now, Sam. Or I'll tell everything. I'll expose it all!"

A tremor went through him. Moving like a sightless man, Hollister stumbled past her, unlocked the door and went home.

His revulsion had been instant. He managed to stall her along with promises. But each time he saw her his revulsion increased as if a cold slow billow kept breaking over him. He tried to explain that her demands were impossible. She only grew more resentful and rigid.

Behind his habitual exterior he felt fear, then panic as he strove to comprehend what she was doing to him. Then he began to nurse heated resentment. It would have been bad enough had he ever, by word or deed, given her cause for fastening herself on him this way. He saw her as she really was behind that wistful timorous facade. A greedy frustrate, starved to hysterical jealousy, in whom lonely chastity with all its accompaniments had been irksome as it was despairing. Pity, guilt turned to obsessions about his own survival. He knew he was being considered for promotion to Principal of the entire school district. He began to feel only a keen sense of the prize, a greater horror of the inevitable penalty of disgrace.

He felt the increasing itch of ambition plus nagging anxiety about his professional future, his reputation, all that he was, his very life. Then Louella Prentz's face would pop up before him and ruin it all. It had become a peculiarly vicious face as he saw it now, corrugated, with stiff hair and tight uncompromising lips. Sometimes he saw it drawn with pain, swollen with tears, and that made it even uglier. What was she doing here at all? Why was she here, interfering with his life, threatening him with destruction?

Then she had given him one more week, until Friday, to make up his mind.

There were things about Hollister that no one had ever seen behind his pink and amiable features. One could almost say that his entire life had been one of protective secrecy. He was apt to sullenness that seemed merely reflec-

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tion. He was inclined to long-held malices that he was scarcely aware of himself, rather than outbreaks. It must also be said of him that he would have preferred any other way out but the one forced upon him. He had cajoled, beseeched, begged, everything but threatened. He was incapable of threats. Miss Prentz would accept no compromise.

Hollister felt a steady deadening of will, a removal of the sense of consequences and fear. Louella Prentz no doubt considered her own position and her demands honorable and just. Her mistake was in knowing as little about Hollister as he had known about her. She never realized that to him, her demands were tantamount to a threat of murder, that he could only act in self-defense, that his only apparent solution was to destroy her.

Self-pity, self-compassion, sucked meaning out of every existence but that of Samuel Hollister. Suddenly, without ever having seemed conscious of what he had to do, he was perfectly, composedly and deliberately working out the complicated plan to be finished with dispatch. Single-minded in all that he did, one town, one career, one wife, one affair of a sort, he sought one all-conclusive plan.

Hollister's ordinary casual manner during those hours immediately preceding the murder was logical enough. It was a question strictly of survival, and Hollister's time-tested tricks of survival had always been business-as-usual with an ingenuous face, shy reproach, a wistful smile. Also, the plan had become objective, a part of his rigidly channeled life's goal. Concealment was an integral part of the plan. The problem had been created by laws of secrecy. Its solution and its motive must never be known or suspected by anyone. The problem had to be solved in such a way as to prove somehow that it had never existed.

It is doubtful that Hollister had much special feeling for it that afternoon as he smilingly approached Miss Prentz as she left the study hall. He had begun committing murder three weeks before, by admitting the inexplicable and horrible to a slowly increasing familiarity.

"Oh, Miss Prentz," he said.

She turned, returned his smile. Students droned past, saw nothing between their principal and Miss Prentz but some dull act of school protocol.

"Yes, Mr. Hollister."

"I've made a decision about your suggested plan, Miss Prentz. I'm in complete agreement with it. An excellent idea."

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Color rose up through the dry wick of her face. "I'm so glad, Mr. Hollister."

He lowered his voice. "The storage room at five. I'll tell you all about it."

She flushed and nodded and followed her English class down the hall toward their classroom. Her angular frame with its awkward, self-conscious attempt at coy feminine grace no longer revolted him. Her form was merely symbolic of a threat to his further existence.

Anyone looking closely with suspicion at Hollister might have seen a difference in his smile. There was a look of gentle drollery, and a bit of cunning that came into his eyes.

It was said that he even had the gall to drop in for a casual inspection of Miss Prentz's English class on his way back to his office. According to one student witness, Miss Prentz was reading poetry to the class at the time.

At ten minutes to five, Hollister locked his office and walked to the end of South hall. Nothing, he thought, was ever so quiet as a suddenly deserted school house. He had been listening, feeling it all so long that it was hard to remember a time when he had been doing anything else. It was a rise and fall, part of the rhythm of his life, like waking and sleeping, the buzzing that began mornings like a great hive, the buzzing getting louder, suddenly stopping, the hive emptying and being filled with a sullen, throbbing stillness.

It had never seemed this quiet before, as he hurried past the English classroom to the end of the hall. Remembering, for some reason, that it was March and soon school would be out for the summer, he paused to look out the window. The sun was almost gone in a charcoal smear above the football stadium. The wind was making a little whistling sound under the window sill, and it was cold. Hollister shivered, gave a slight cough, then shrugged with what seemed only a faint distaste.

A few students straggled down the street with the wind as if merely drifting anywhere at all with no purpose or destination. Sometimes he despised their lack of dedication and conviction. Gumwrappers, all sorts of scrap paper, whirled across the trampled lawn with its patches of naked clay and dead grass. Ray Bardon, the caretaker, leaned against the flagpole lighting his pipe. He was waiting to lower the flag at sundown.

A dog howled twice. Wind hissed under the sill, and blew tiny and cold against Hollister's hand.

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He heard dim shouts from the phys-ed building where the basketball squad was working out for the big game Friday with Louiston.

Hollister walked upstairs, turned right along the third-floor hall to the double doors leading into the science lab. No light or sound behind the frosted glass. Hollister had known there wouldn't be. Dr. Thompson, a sports enthusiast and assistant coach, always got out early. His last lab class was at 2 p.m. He never came in over weekends. He never allowed students to mess around the lab without proper supervision.

Hollister walked across the lab to the north end, went through another door into a smaller room with a musty odor. He walked past cages of guinea pigs that gave off a faint squealing chorus. He unlocked another door and went into darkness relieved slightly by gray light seeping through a sooty window. He could have shouted with triumph as he entered the storage room. It was as though he had escaped into it. Then as he waited, a slight dizziness went through his head. He pressed his hand to his eyes and took three deep breaths.

He had left the door open a foot. As he waited for Miss Prentz he could listen to the continued apathetic squeal of guinea pigs and the oxygen pumps burbling in the fish tanks, hissing slightly.

He forced himself to breathe deeply, carefully again. No man does a thing better, he told himself, for having his confidence dampened at the outset. To speak of difficulties is in a sense to make them. Speech itself can become a deterrent act. Thought no less so. He mustn't talk any more than necessary. He mustn't think about it.

The squeals grew more excited. He heard the soft pad of Miss Prentz's flat-heeled, rubber-soled shoes. Her shadow hesitated, then ducked into the storage room.

"Shut the door," he said gently.

She leaned back against it as it closed.

"Lock it," he said.

Hollister realized that he was leaning forward as she reached behind her and locked the door, and that he seemed to be grinning a little. It felt stiff and foolish on his face. She took a sliding hesitant step toward him where he stood with his back to a row of jars and jugs containing chemicals.

"Sam," she said, then paused and gave a curious giggle. "Have you told her?"

"No," he said, apologetically.

"What?"

"I can't tell her, Louella. It would never be right that way either. You think so, but it never

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would be, not for anyone, or for you either. You could never see that. But this way no one will worry about it again."

"Sam—?"

She gave a quiet gurgling sound as Hollister raised the lead pipe and hit her on top of the head.

Hollister never understood later why he hit her again on the head as she fell, a third time as she lay on the concrete floor. He had known the first blow was enough. He had read once of someone's skull cracking like an eggshell. But it wasn't like that at all. The pipe seemed to bounce and it stung Hollister's hand.

He dragged her a few feet so that the light from the window shone on her vaguely, but enough so that he could see to take off her clothes. He felt only a shivering surprise at first at the triumph. Oddly as though he had never felt really triumphant in his life until now when he realized that she was dead.

Then as he bent down, his stomach twitched. The whole top of her head was beaten down and there was a lot of unexpected mess. He quickly got her clothes off and wrapped in the brown paper, later to be securely tied with a string, together with her handbag and such indissoluble contents as hairpins, and a ringstone. Then he dragged the body behind several aisles of cartons and shelves to the metal sink. It took five minutes of panting effort to get her body up, over the edge and into the sink so that nothing extended above the rim. Then he made a mop of her blouse and cleaned up the mess on the floor. He put the blouse with the clothes, wrapped it up more tightly and tied it securely with heavy cord.

He felt weak for a moment and leaned against the wall. He felt a slight nausea as he forced himself to listen. He heard nothing unusual except the too loud beating of his heart. A threat of panic came as he knew that he had done a fatal thing, something irreparable. But the threat never came back. He became suddenly composed, deliberate, careful as he returned to his work.

The tank into which he had deposited Miss Prentz was a metal sink. It was from the main lab where it had been replaced a year before by more modern equipment. It had been installed in the storage room as a clean-up sink. The storage room was supposed to have been renovated, turned into an extension of the lab, but funds had never been allotted by the Board of Education. No one used

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the sink. No one ever entered the storage room except on rare occasions, and then only to the front part where the shelves of stored chemicals were. The area behind the cartons by the sink contained only dust, scurf, mould and old cobwebs.

The tank was rusted. He had cut his finger slightly on the corroded edge. That didn't matter. He tied his handkerchief around it as he began pouring acid into the tank. He was responsible for inventory. He could juggle the figures easily enough. There was nothing to worry about. Five gallons of sulphuric acid. Three more gallons of a corrosive much more powerful. It wouldn't be missed for some time, if ever. By that time he could have it replaced. There would be nothing to connect Miss Prentz's disappearance with the school or with Hollister. Their unfortunate involvement was, he knew positively, a secret. If anyone had known of it, there were certain kids in the school who would have made their nasty, vicious, most out of the information.

He coughed as acid fumes rose around his face. His eyes watered. He went to the window and opened it three inches. By tomorrow the fumes would have dissipated and be unnoticeable. There would be no chemical lab class tomorrow. Thompson always skipped his afternoon classes on the Friday of a big game. Friday, Saturday, Sunday. By Monday, the body would be thoroughly liquidized. Hollister would have another look Friday afternoon before going to the game in Louiston, check and see if the liquidizing was progressing in a satisfactory way. He knew it would be, as he had given the problem a great deal of thought and research. Everything, he knew, would dissolve. That was the sort of problem it had been in the first place, one that had to be completely dissolved. Body fat, gall-stones, certain plastic substances like dentures, resisted to some degree the erosion of concentrated sulphuric acid. But the three gallons of more intense corrosive would take care of those.

He emptied the acid, then placed the canvas-and-board cover back over the sink. He piled cartons, glass and books over the cover. Then, carrying the package of clothes and other personal items, he walked down into the furnace room. He remembered to take her car keys and all non-burnable objects from the handbag and put them in his pockets. Everything else went into the furnace flames.

It was dark outside on the parking lot. There were no unusual sounds or signs of anyone about.

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He saw the lights in the ad building indicating where the janitor was working his way along from the North wing, top floor down past the science lab on the second. The janitor didn't clean the storage room as a rule, and there was no reason for him to change his habit pattern tonight. But Hollister stood and watched the light go on in the science lab. After half an hour it went out. No light appeared behind the storage room window.

Hollister put on gloves and drove her car carefully by a roundabout route outside the city limits and down the Old Mill Road. After leaving her car parked by the side of the road near Jones Culvert, he walked through the woods back to the high school stadium, across the field to the parking lot and to his own car. When Mrs. Hollister greeted him he was only five minutes late for dinner.

At ten o'clock Friday morning, Hollister was engaged in what the public later considered his most reprehensible and callous act. He was teaching, substituting for Miss Prentz in her English class, Room 104. The only difference students reported later in the familiar Hollister was what might have been a brighter wit, a bit more boldness.

He had assured the class that Miss Prentz would soon be with them again, although no one had asked or had seemed to care. No one knew what had happened to her, so Hollister did not presume to speculate on the possible reason for her absence. He asked what Miss Prentz had given them as Friday's assignment, and was told that they were reading favorite poems aloud. Comments and discussions were to follow each rendition.

"Well then, please proceed," said Hollister as he sat behind the desk and looked at the wall clock. At eleven he would go to the storage room and check the progression.

" 'Beneath this slab John Brown is stowed. He watched the ads, and not the road,' " quoted Jamie Hendricks.

"Well, who composed that?" Hollister asked as if ignorance of source was a virtue in this case. There were nervous outbreaks of humor.

"Ogden Nash," Jamie said. "I like anything that's for laughs. I don't go for mushy stuff."

"Go on, then," Hollister said. "Have you anything else for laughs?"

"Sure. This one's called 'The Skink.' "

Hollister looked up as the sound he hadn't been sure that he had

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heard before now seemed undeniable. A slight cracking in the ceiling. It was then that he saw it on the ceiling, the dull spreading patch of something dark and oily, as big as a spread beachtowel.

" 'Let us do justice to the skink who isn't what so many think. On consultation with a wizard, I find the skink a kind of lizard. Since he is not a printer's whim, don't sniff and back away from him . . .' "

For a few seconds Hollister stared up at it. He could not at first think what it could be. Then he remembered that the storage room was up there over the first floor English class room. Saliva was flooding his mouth. He swallowed hard. Plaster trickled from a widening crack. It fell on top of Margie Van Fleet's desk. She looked up.

" 'Or you may be adjudged too drunk to tell a lizard from a skunk.' "

No one laughed. Several students were looking up at the ceiling. The rest looked at Hollister.

"What's the matter?" asked Mary Stearns from the front row. "You look pale."

Hollister took off his glasses and polished them absently. Sweat appeared on his thin upper lip. A tremor came. It was a long pulse against his eardrum. There seemed to be a slight shudder of a windowpane, a tremble along the floor. Students looked around the room, and at each other.

Hollister replaced his glasses and blinked at the ceiling. They had found her car, of course. Her landlady had called, hysterically, and the sheriff and others had looked around and asked questions and now they were out searching the woods near Jones Culvert. "She left here at about the same time Thursday evening as usual, I suppose," Hollister had said. "I didn't see her leave."

Hollister tried not to look up at the ceiling. He tried to keep on smiling. "Very funny, Jamie. Who is next, please?"

Mary Stearns stood up and nervously opened a book.

" 'Oft in the Stilly Night,' " she read. She glanced up at the ceiling. She looked as if she wanted to scream. If she did, he would hit her. The thing was to keep steady. A scream was an awful sound, chilling and raw. He wouldn't be able to stand it.

"Continue please," he said sternly. "Read the poem."

"The ceiling," someone whispered behind Mary Stearns.

Mary Stearns, her face pale, went on reading.

Hollister tried to stand but he seemed unable to move. He tried

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to believe he wasn't seeing it, that no one was seeing it, that it was an illusion caused by his nerves. He sat, his scalp shrinking, trying to move.

Wood split. Chunks of soggy plaster fell. Boards, slats, beams splintered overhead. Plaster dust drifted. There were whispers, then shouts as students ran for the exits. Mary Stearns, voice quavering, kept on reading her favorite poem as if unable to stop, as if afraid to look over her shoulder at whatever Hollister was looking at.

What he was looking at was the tank sagging through the rent in the ceiling. There was a jagged hole in the rusted tank. He realized what had happened, but it seemed to be something on the far periphery of his mind. The corrosive had eaten through the metal, down through the floor, eaten away at the wood. The weight of the tank had taken care of the rest.

Then he saw the thick liquid drooling down from the ceiling. It was a dirty, partly yellow greasy stuff that dribbled over the desks and over the floor. A large quantity of thick charred greasy sludge soon collected and spread out under adjoining desks.

"What is it?" someone said.

Something plunked in the sludge. Suddenly there was no one in the room. No one but Hollister and Mary Stearns. Hollister was there because he was unable to move. He no longer cared. He kept looking at the object lying in the greasy residue. He finally distinguished, embedded in the grease, several masses of partly dissolved bone, the largest of which proved to be the greater part of a right foot.

Mary Stearns still read in a faint voice as pale faces peered through the doorways.

"'I seem like one who treads alone
Some banquet-hall deserted,
Whose guests are fled, whose garlands dead
And all but he—departed—'"

Mary Stearns dropped the book and ran out of the room.

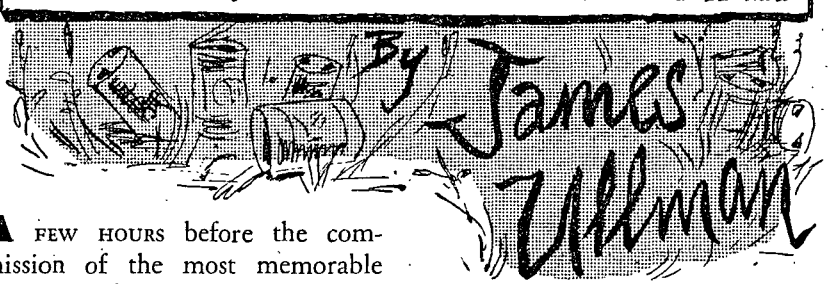
Hollister kept looking at the floor and nodding his head slowly up and down as if he were approving of some continuing recitation, and still hearing it.

Every Thursday

The new television show, ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS, is one hour long, and will be seen on Thursday evenings, at 10 PM, on the CBS network.

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KEEP OUR CITY CLEAN



A FEW HOURS before the commission of the most memorable crime in the otherwise somnolent history of Maryvale, Illinois, Harry Morton's wife looked up from a living room chair.

She asked: "Where are you going?"

"Over to Braun's place," Harry said. "It's about time I have a talk with that fellow."

"For the Clean-Up Committee, you mean?"

"That's right. His home is an eyesore. I should have seen him weeks ago, instead of discussing the matter with Mrs. Braun."

"You be careful. The neighbors say he has a terrible temper." Sarah Morton's tired, kindly features mirrored concern. "And you know the business he's in. Managing that night club downtown, the one the newspapers say is owned by hoodlums. A man with your

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Those zealous citizens who form themselves into committees for the better upkeep of vacant lots, homes, lawns, and incinerators, are not without merit, but they also have irritating ways.



background, you can't afford to get mixed up with him."

"Since I'm chairman of the Clean-Up Committee, it's my job," Harry replied stubbornly. A thin, stoop-shouldered man, Harry moved with an easy grace despite his nearly seventy years. He did not drink, he did not smoke, and he still performed calisthenics regularly. He wore an old man's perpetually rumpled trousers, a white shirt, and an ancient, wide-flaring necktie.

"One careless householder like Braun," Harry went on, "can start the whole neighborhood downhill. All property values may decline. But then, we really haven't given him a chance. He's never lived in a home of his own before, and maybe he just doesn't understand. If I put it to him in a decent way, I think he'll listen to reason."

"I doubt it."

"We'll see."

The Braun residence, a ranch-style dwelling about ten years old, was surrounded by a ragged, weedy lawn. Paint peeled from the eaves. Dirt and grime clouded the picture window. As Harry started up the front walk, he gazed through the glass into a living room littered with newspapers, overloaded ash trays and empty glasses.

"Back here," a woman shouted.

Harry detoured around the side of the building. In the back yard he encountered Braun's wife, a plump, blonde woman garbed in an abbreviated sunsuit. She reclined on a lawn chair, a magazine in one hand.



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"Oh, it's you," she said. She removed her sunglasses, pinched the bridge of her nose, and frowned.

"Good afternoon," Harry ventured cordially. "Did you have a chance to mention our last conversation to your husband?"

"Yeah." Mrs. Braun didn't elaborate.

"I was wondering if I might see him," Harry went on. He glanced at his wrist watch. "I hope I'm not too early. It's six o'clock. I knew he sleeps days and works nights . . ."

"Oh, he's probably up." The woman yawned. "I'll go get him."

Harry looked toward the alley. The back of Braun's lot was still as he had last seen it—a jungle of weeds, tin cans and miscellaneous debris. A smouldering pile of ashes evidenced a recent open trash fire.

"Mrs. Braun," Harry said politely as she rose, "we have an ordinance, you know, banning the open burning of trash. It's not only a hazard, it spreads soot all over the neighborhood. As a new resident, I'm sure you weren't aware of this. To conform with the ordinance, all you have to do is buy an inexpensive incinerator. . . ."

"My husband," the woman replied sharply, "will talk to you about all that."

With an insolent toss of her hips, she strode into the house.

Jake Braun came out a minute later.

Braun, a large, heavy-set, florid man with close-cropped hair, wore slacks and a polo shirt. He carried a can of beer.

"How do you do," Harry began. "I'm . . ."

"I know who you are," Braun snapped. He paused to take a swallow from the can. Then he walked slowly toward Harry.

Braun asked: "What's your beef?"

"I have no 'beef'," Harry replied. Uneasily, he tried to maintain his smile. Braun stood very close, towering nearly half-a-foot above him. "It's my responsibility, you see, to make inspection tours for the Clean-Up Committee, of which I'm chairman. We're quite proud of our suburb, you know. Our motto is: 'Keep Our City Clean. . . .'"

"Where does your committee get its authority?" Braun demanded. "And who elected you chairman?"

"Ours is a voluntary group, which I organized personally. And I confess, I got the chairman's job by default. I'm retired. The other fellows work all day and don't have the time."

"In other words," Braun said,

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sipping at the beer again, moving to the lawn chair and sitting down, "you elected yourself chairman, because you've got nothing better to do except nose around in other people's business. You're the self-chosen head of a group of bluenosed volunteers, with no legal standing of any kind, and you've come here to tell me what you think I should do with my property. Right?"

"That's putting it a little unfairly."

"Listen, pal. My wife told me how you think I should stop burning paper in the alley, how I should cut the weeds, paint the eaves, mow the lawn and all that jazz. Now I'll tell *you* something. This is my place, and what I do on my place is *my* business, not yours, whether you like me or not."

"There's nothing personal in it. We just think . . ."

"I know you guys," Braun continued, his face beginning to redden with anger. "You think you're better than I am, just because you have so-called respectable jobs, because you belong to your lousy property owners associations and PTAs and whatnot. You're out to make it tough for me, because I run a night club, I got some friends you wouldn't approve of, and I don't cut the grass as often as you do. Well, Mr. Morton, I'll give you some excellent advice."

Braun tipped the beer can and emptied it. Contemptuously, he raised one thick arm and tossed the can into the alley. He grinned.

"Don't you," Braun went on, staring intently at Harry, "ever set foot on my property again. Don't ever make another complaint to me or my wife. Don't ever go to City Hall and swear out warrants about my burning trash or anything else. Because if you do, I'll make you very sorry."

"Is that," Harry asked, his lower lip trembling slightly, "a threat?"

"Confidentially, it is," Braun said. He rose and approached Harry again. He spoke softly, but his voice was taut with rage. "In my business, old man, you meet all sorts of people. Some of them will do anything for me. If you don't get off my back with this corny clean-up routine, some of them might cut the tires on your car to ribbons, or bust every window in your house. They might even set your house on fire, or dump you head-first into a garbage can, where a busybody like you belongs. Or they could do even worse."

Braun paused. "Nobody heard me say that to you just now. And if you ever tell anyone I said it, I'll deny it. What's more, if you

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tell anyone, sooner or later you'll get it. You or your wife or maybe both of you. Understand?"

"I think I do."

"That's fine." Without warning, Braun reached out and grabbed Harry's thin shoulders. He spun Harry around and pushed him toward the alley. Harry stumbled, barely righting himself.

"Now beat it," Braun said.

As Harry disappeared from sight behind Braun's garage, Braun laughed.

Harry's wife was asleep when he returned. She had dozed off in the easy chair, a newspaper on her lap.

Fondly, Harry gazed at her.

Then, on tiptoes, he crossed the room and opened a cabinet. He pulled out a black leather travelling bag, which he carried to a coffee table.

His wife stirred. She opened her eyes.

"Sorry to wake you," Harry said.

"How did it go?"

"Not very well. You were right about Braun."

Sarah looked at the travelling bag. "Harry, did you take another job? I thought you promised to retire for good."

"I have. This isn't a contract for the Organization, dear. It's personal." Harry lifted a .45 automatic from the bag and checked the action. "Braun is an irresponsible man of violence—a mad-dog type. Eventually, he's bound to hurt someone here in Maryvale. And he actually threatened me this afternoon. So I have no choice."

"You be careful," Harry's wife advised. She closed her eyes again.

"Don't worry," Harry said. He rammed a clip of bullets into the gun. "I'll hit him tonight, when he goes out for his car. With his underworld connections, the police will think it's a Syndicate murder. Having committed enough of them, I'll make it look plenty authentic." He smiled and added: "One way or another, it seems, I'm going to keep our city clean."



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There seems to be no end at all to the field of detection. Now it is being invaded, not only by spinsters who knit rather than spin, but by teachers who learn instead of teaching. Ah me! for the good old days of Hawkshaw, who never pretended to be anything but what he was.

THESE DAISIES TOLD



By Arthur Porges

Not many men can begin a new and fascinating career at the age of sixty-five. But Ulysses Price Middlebie, Professor (Emeritus) of the History and Philosophy of Science, was one of the few, and this is an account of his first case.

Unlike most of his senior colleagues at Bateman University, he saw no reason to kick and scream over the loss of a captive audience. Although he enjoyed teaching, Middlebie had other resources. For he was a man with an enormous zest for living. Not just the life of the intellect, although that was probably his favorite mode of existence; but also the life of blood-and-bone. To him, retirement was merely a welcome change from the

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classroom to the open fields and busy tide-pools.

He was a tall, lean man, big-boned, and with the springy step of a boy. His physical fitness was due, undoubtedly, to many years of the "endless quest", as he called the search for knowledge. As President of the local Audubon Society, he made the study of birds only one phase in his development as a well-rounded naturalist. Middlebie could identify over two hundred species of birds in Southern California, often from just a glance at their flights or wing-patterns. He was equally at home with plants and hundreds of small animals, including, naturally, insects; the common sea-shells; and even the constellations overhead. With his brisk sparrow of a wife he had studied flora and fauna from San Diego to Santa Barbara. In short, he had the background to be expected—but not often found—in a man who presumed to teach the History and Philosophy of Science.

It was because of this universal grasp of nature that the professor acquired his niche as consultant in crime. He was used to teaching new members of the Audubon Society the difference between a plover and a sandpiper; just as he was ready to explain that the striped, fearsome-looking "bug" in a neighbor's garden was merely a harmless sluggish Jerusalem Cricket. But it had never occurred to him that he was uniquely qualified to catch criminals.

If Detective Sergeant Black hadn't been one of Middlebie's students, the contact, which later proved so valuable to the police, might never have been made. But the officer remembered how quickly, on field trips, the old man's unerring eyes had found and interpreted correctly, all those little indicators that speak volumes to a naturalist. That memory inspired him to ask for the professor's help in a time of trial, when his own career as a detective hung in the balance.

He outlined his difficulties as they sat in Middlebie's study, a large, sunny room, crammed with books and fragrant with the odor of good tobacco.

"It's the matter of a missing body," Black told him. "Without it, we don't have much of a case, but we're certain the woman is dead—murdered."

"Perhaps you'd better give me all the available facts," the professor said mildly. If he was surprised at the type of problem presented to a retired teacher, he didn't show it. A missing body, philosophically speaking, was no different from any other object absent from its normal place in the universe. And

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nothing could be altered in the real world without affecting other objects around it. Given enough of such changes, and the sequence of events could be reconstructed.

"There isn't very much to tell," the sergeant said. Then he added hastily: "I know, Sir, you always stressed the fact that we must note everything possible relating to a scientific problem; even if some of the information seems to have no connection at the time."

"That's quite right. Nobody is ever in a position to know right at the start which data are relevant. And they might not be available later if missed at the beginning. In the case of Faraday and his discovery of induction—but I musn't digress—that's one sin of old age I mean to fight. Go ahead, sergeant."

"Well, to put it bluntly, we're practically sure that this man, Dale Corsi, has killed his wife; but we can't find her body."

Middlebie's eyebrows rose slightly, and Black winced. He knew the mannerism. He had noted it in class when somebody had formed a unique specific conclusion from facts which warranted only several, alternate explanations.

"I'd like to hear your reasons," the professor said.

"It's simple, in a way. She's been gone for a week—disappeared completely; and nobody has seen her around or even heard from her."

"But this is a heavily populated area. One person could easily vanish if she chose to."

"Not in this case, I think you'll agree. They live on a small ranch, quite off the main highway. She didn't take her car, and there are very few buses going by that would stop there. We found no record of anybody matching her description who left the area by any reasonable means."

"That's still not mathematical proof; but I'm sure you know that. But what does her husband—Corsi, you said?—say?"

"He maintains she must have left him; that they hadn't been getting along. The last part is true enough. We found some bloodstains in the house, but unfortunately he and his wife have the same type. So when he showed us a cut on his arm, our evidence was pretty useless. It's a million to one he cut himself purposely to account for his wife's blood, but we can't prove that either."

"Ingenious fellow," Middlebie said dryly. "Any motive?"

"Plenty. As I said, they hated each other. In addition, she owned the ranch and brought scads of money to the marriage. The cash is in a joint account—or was—he drew it out almost immediately, and deposited it in a new account,

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under his own name, individually."

"That would be to keep the state from tying it up once her disappearance was known."

"Right. We're told she was ready to knock his name off anyhow. That's one more reason for him to kill her."

"On the other hand, until she's presumed dead, which could take years if you don't find the body, he couldn't do much about her other assets."

"That's true; but we don't contend the murder was carefully planned in cold blood. He may have lost his temper. But afterwards he managed to get rid of—or destroy—the body; that's what has us stumped."

"I'm not clear why that should puzzle you. There are thousands of acres of farmland where a body could be buried."

"Not in this case." The sergeant spoke with conviction. "Corsi himself doesn't drive. There's a high fence around the ranch that would take some doing to get a body over or through. The neighboring places are all heavily cultivated just now—beans, orange groves, walnut trees; stuff like that. The sort of terrain where any grave would be found the next day. No, we figure the body has to be on his own land, unless it's been totally destroyed, which is not only unlikely, but is damned near impossible."

"All right, then; what makes you certain it's not on the Corsi property?"

"All I know is that we can't find it," Black said in a bitter voice. "The ground cover, mostly iceplant, hasn't been disturbed. Neither have the flower beds his wife planted, although one looked mighty suspicious at first. We even used bloodhounds to trace Corsi's movements; but they just proved he didn't leave the ranch recently. Naturally, his tracks were found all over the place; he walks quite a lot."

"You say he's an artist. How good?"

"Not very—at least, that's what the critics tell us. One of them explained he has some talent, but dabbles too much, and wastes it. He paints in both oils and watercolors, sculpts a little; uses any old material around: wood, concrete—even those crazy things made from rusty junk. 'Spirit of a Dead Hot Rod,' one of them is called. It's in the house—ugh! What the hell do people see in stuff like that?"

The professor chuckled.

"I wouldn't know; I'm rather a conservative about art and music. But I'm not foolish enough to condemn it en masse without knowing more about the subject. However, Corsi's versatility could be

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significant. He has a loose and active imagination, apparently. Maybe he made good use of it to dispose of the body. If there is one," he added, with a sly twinkle in his wide-set grey eyes.

"You bet there's one," was the sergeant's grim retort. "With our own routines we're very efficient. If that woman had left the grounds, we'd have had some evidence to that effect. There's always somebody who sees something; believe me, I know."

"But you say the place is rather isolated."

"True; but she wouldn't go across country. Not a frail little thing—which is what she was. You know how those fields are. She'd have to go several hundred yards down a dirt road to the highway, and then either wait for a bus, or hitch a ride. But all her clothes are still in the house. No, Professor, he got rid of her body somehow. After all, he had almost a week before she was missed."

"Let me summarize the situation before I look for solutions. You've examined every foot of the ranch, and found no grave."

"That's right. We didn't miss any of it. There are only a few acres, and I used a dozen good men who know what to look for."

"And I presume there's no evidence of dissection, burning, or acids—not that they'd be feasible, actually. The human body is very hard to destroy completely."

"Almost impossible."

Professor Middlebie stood up.

"It's time I had a look, then. The armchair phase seems to be over. Now I need data at first hand. Assuming you're right, and the body is actually hidden on the ranch, we should be able to find it."

"I sure hope so," the sergeant said fervently. "The captain is riding my back like a jockey." They left.

"A nice place," Middlebie said, as they explored the small ranch. "Suffering from drought like all this region, but basically good. Notice the huge rocks that crop out here and there almost as if deliberately planned for scenic effect. They're granite; magnificent things. And I see somebody planted zinnias near this one."

"If you're thinking she's under one of the rocks," Sergeant Black said, "I'd forget that angle. There are only about three small enough to be moved even with a heavy tow-truck. He doesn't drive, remember, and the only car on the ranch is a little station wagon, anyhow. But we looked those three smaller rocks over very carefully. They haven't been budged."

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"I know that," Middlebie said, a bit tartly. "It would be impossible to move them without disturbing soil and vegetation, even if the tools were available." He looked up as a flock of birds sailed by. "Curlews. Flying to the Bay." He studied the granite mass for a moment, and said: "If this was sandstone, a man might even make a hollow in it big enough for a body, given a few days to work. But not in granite—trained sculptor or John Henry himself." He peered at the patch of zinnias, and a faint frown touched his mobile face. His grey eyes were suddenly cloudy with thought.

"Look at those plants at the edge of the flowerbed," he told Black. "Notice how spindly they are? Taller than the rest, but thin and scraggly. Even their colors are not as bright."

There was a harsh, cawing sound in the distance; the old man smiled.

"Raven," he said. "Fascinating pirate of a bird."

"We didn't miss these flowers," the sergeant said. "They're the one suspicious spot I mentioned at your house. But it's a false lead. We probed with rods, far down, and it's certain the ground hasn't been dug into. In fact, if you look closely, it's clear the soil hasn't been touched for months."

"Oh, I agree," Middlebie said. "Of course, there's no body under these zinnias. But everything in nature has a cause. I ask you, Sergeant, why this one part of a flower bed should be so atypical?"

"I don't know," Black replied, a little impatiently. The old boy was a bit pompous and longwinded today. Maybe he'd lost whatever had impressed the pupil of five years back. "Poorer soil there, maybe; disease; I'm no botanist. What's your theory?"

"I don't have one yet. Remember—first comes the harvest of the eye. Then the crop must be winnowed, to separate the wheat from the chaff. My eye has noted these aberrant flowers; what that fact means, if anything, in relation to our problem, is not clear. But I'll be winnowing mentally as we finish our inspection of the ranch. After you, Sergeant."

Black started to move away, but the old man stood there listening. A faint snapping sound came from a tree.

"Audubon warbler," the professor announced, to nobody in particular. Then he followed the detective.

An hour later, they returned to the same spot. Middlebie had seemed alert enough, but Black

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felt that one part of the old man's mind was still busy with the zinnias.

"Well?" he asked the professor, as they stood near the large granite rock overshadowing the red and yellow blossoms.

"I'm inclined to agree with you that there's no grave on this ranch. If you're convinced he had no means to destroy the remains physically—"

"I'm convinced."

"Then it's hidden some other way. Purloined letter style, perhaps."

"But where, damn it? You've been over the place. Is this guy going to get away with it clean, just because he found some cute way of hiding a hundred pounds of flesh-and-blood right under our noses?"

"I'd like to get up on the rock for a minute," the professor said quietly.

Black gaped at him.

"There's nothing up there. The top's in plain sight. Oh," he added, looking sheepish. "You want to make a survey of the place from a higher point."

"No," Middlebie said. "That's not the idea at all." He moved to one side of the rock. "This is a good spot, right here. How about a boost? Just link your hands—come on, man." Bewildered, the detective did as he was told. With a litheness uncommon in a person his age, the professor put one foot in the sergeant's hands, and by clutching the edge of the huge boulder, pulled himself smoothly to the rugged, tilted surface. He got to his feet, then stooped to scrutinize the granite top. Rising, he repeated his inspection at two other places. Finally he stood on the very edge, peering down at Black.

"The zinnia is a flower that



thrives on sunlight, and suffers badly without it," he said, as if addressing a class. "If you suddenly cut off a good part of the summer sunshine, the plant soon becomes spindly; it grows faster and higher, trying to make up the loss—reaching for the light, you might say, just as we have been today.

"Now, why should one part of a flower bed abruptly be short of light? It's an interesting question. Certainly the sun's rays are not

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discriminating. The only reason I could think of was new shade. From somewhere, caused by something, a shadow fell upon these few plants—a shadow that wasn't there a week ago. It couldn't have been caused by the season; not with longer days still to come. What's the answer?" He scrambled down without asking for help, and stood beside the sergeant, looking up at the massive rock.

"What do you see on top?" the professor asked him. "Take a good look."

"Not a damned thing," Black replied, circling the boulder. "Just a rough surface of rock, full of ridges and humps. I don't know what you're getting at."

"A very competent artist, Corsi," Middlebie said. "It's no wonder you don't spot his work up there. He moulded a mausoleum on top of the rock, using concrete and coloring with wonderful expertise. Even from my position right alongside, I had to take a very careful look to be sure. His concrete mix has the texture and hue of the granite; in addition, he even shaped the mass to continue the proper contours for that part of the rock. After all, who would notice a relatively small increase in the total bulk—a mound roughly the size of a little woman, and blended with the many tons around it? Just a tiny change in the dimensions. Most people see without really comprehending, anyway. I suppose few of them ever gave this magnificent outcropping more than a passing glance.

"Yes, Sergeant, she's up there, all right, along the left edge. It's a pity," he added in a lower voice, "that she can't be left just where we found her. To be on top of a sunny rock, with the birds flying near, overlooking orchards and green fields, surely that's better than a hole in the ground." He was silent for a moment, his face grave. Then he brightened a little, and gestured towards the patch of glowing flowers.

"Do you know, Sergeant, zinnias are members of the daisy family—but these finally did tell."



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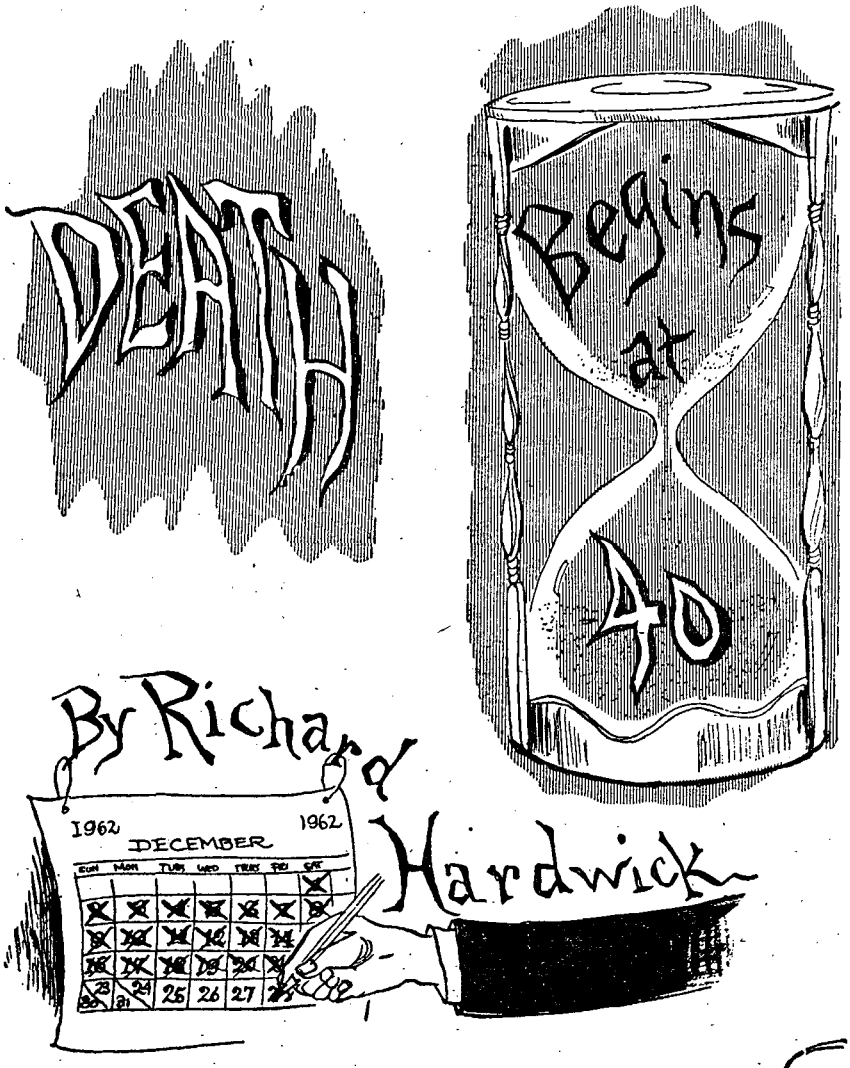
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Generally, it is the so-called frailer or weaker sex who are so conscious of the passage of time that they hear the knell of doom in the number forty. Generally speaking, that is.

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ROBERT HOLMES painfully crossed off another day on his desk calendar. Seventeen days. Seventeen short, swift days and he would be forty years old. Oddly, with each succeeding year the age gap between him and Eloise seemed to widen, as if time were carrying him along and leaving her behind.

Holmes had sensed for some time that she no longer regarded him the way she had during their courtship and the early years of their marriage. In the beginning she had looked on him as being attractively mature, while now he felt that she regarded him as growing old. It was no trick of his imagination the way he saw Eloise looking at the younger men at the club, and a number of them—young bucks like Ed Mathis—were not above doing something about it.

She was closer to those people. Eloise, by some strange chemistry, was not ageing as fast as Holmes. At twenty-nine she had the appearance of being half a dozen years younger. She had beauty and youth. And, of course, she had money.

By nature Eloise was gregarious. Before their marriage she had been one of the most popular girls in the city, full of verve and personality. Holmes had thought she would become a bit calmer after she was married, and, in fact, she had. But only for a year or two, until the newness of married life had worn thin.

That trip to Jamaica, how long ago had that been? Five years? Holmes still remembered the night down there when Eloise and Buzz Franklin had vanished from the party and neither of them had showed up till after dawn the following morning. There had certainly never been anything like a satisfactory explanation of that.

But in those days Holmes had not felt this incipient ageing. Then he could still look in a mirror and see there a strikingly handsome, unwrinkled face, a hairline that had not retreated so much as a fraction of an inch, a firmness about the eyes, a square-cut chin.

Now, incredibly in those few fleeting years, time had exacted a toll. Not only was the hairline receding at an alarming rate, that which was not falling out was actually becoming gray. Beneath the eyes hung small but noticeable pouches that no amount of sleep or moderation would remove. And in profile, the once pugnacious chin was definitely sagging, an undeniable precursor to a double chin.

Was any of this happening to Eloise? No! She marched through

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time as if she owned it, utterly unscathed.

Holmes, feeling his security imperiled, had completely convinced himself that the only answer to his problem lay in Eloise's death. And yet, Eloise had youth and appallingly robust health in her favor, not to mention that longevity was a family trait. This combination virtually eliminated all chance for a natural death. An accident, while it could be devoutly hoped for, was also in the realm of extreme improbability. Thus Robert Holmes found himself with a sole possibility. In order for Eloise to die he would have to kill her himself.

No moral or ethical barrier stood in his way. On the contrary, he would have felt no more pangs of conscience at putting Eloise away than he would have felt at slapping a bothersome mosquito. It was the old deterrent of possibly having to suffer the consequences that stopped him. For months he had lain awake nights trying vainly to concoct some method that would not leave him vulnerable. But since he was the only person who would profit by her death, suspicion because of any odd or unusual death would naturally center on him.

This pall of gloom was pierced only when Holmes learned of the room underneath the garage.

Robert Holmes' accustomed first stop upon leaving his father-in-laws's office each afternoon was one block away at the Blue Goose Lounge. This particular afternoon being no exception he went into the cool semi-darkness and took a seat at the long mahogany bar. There were a dozen other patrons and a half a minute elapsed before the bartender appeared before him.

"Hi, Mr. Holmes. What'll it be, the usual?"

He nodded. "The usual, Dutch."

The bartender busied himself and shortly placed a martini on the bar.

"Dry?" queried Holmes.

"As the desert breeze," said Dutch. He watched as Holmes took his first approving sip. He liked to see Robert Holmes come into his place in the afternoons. There was something about Holmes that was just a cut classier than the run-of-the-mill customer. "Say, Mr. Holmes, you live out on Huntington, don't you?"

Holmes took a cigarette from the gold case Eloise had given him for his thirty-eighth birthday. "That's right, Dutch. One thirty-four, a colonial house back up on a hill—"

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"With a tennis court and a four car garage?" Dutch interrupted.

"You know the place?"

"I used to work for a fellow that owned it back during prohibition. Jake Conyers owned the house then. Jake was the biggest bootlegger in town in them days, probably the biggest in the whole state."

"Is that a fact," Holmes said, finishing his drink. He decided to have another and pushed the glass across the bar.

"Yeah," Dutch went on, "old Jake had a real operation going for him. The Mayor, the Governor, big shot executives, they were all Jake's customers." He mixed the drink expertly and placed it before Holmes. "Jake took a lot of pride in his quick delivery. The customers would phone in their orders and we'd get the stuff out of the stock room under the garage and run it right to them."

Holmes looked up from his drink. "Room under the garage? There's no room under the garage."

The bartender shook his head. "Probably been filled in a long time ago, but there used to be one under there. There was a trapdoor in the garage floor and some steps leading down. The door was on a spring and you had to push a certain place on the wall to make it open. A couple of times the Feds raided Jake, but they never did find that room."

Dutch moved away to wait on another customer and Holmes felt a hand touch his shoulder. It was Charlie Fremont, and Charlie obviously wasn't on his first drink.

"Hi, Bob boy!" He took the stool next to Holmes.

"Celebrating, Charlie?"

"Wife's outta town visiting her sister. First time the old lady's left me by myself in fifteen years." Dutch came back and the newcomer ordered a drink. Then he turned and punched Holmes' arm. "Say, maybe I'm telling tales outta school, but—" he glanced around secretively "—I just saw your charming bride."

"So?"

"Well, this probably ain't any of my business, and if you weren't a pal o' mine I'd more than likely keep my big mouth shut—"

"Come on, Charlie," Holmes said irritably. "I haven't got all afternoon."

Charlie bobbed his head and took a deep swallow of his drink. "I been hittin' a few of the bars around town—"

"That I can see," said Holmes.

"Well, I was in that little place over on Broad Street, the Domino, and that's where I saw Eloise. She was with a kid by the name of

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Mathis. Eddie Mathis, I believe."

Holmes' glass stopped halfway to his lips. Mathis? Young Ed Mathis? Strange, but that very name had crossed Holmes' thoughts only recently. It was almost as though it had been some sort of premonition.

"You're—sure?" he said to Fremont.

"Look, Bob, I've had a few drinks but there's nothing wrong with my eyesight. Sure I'm sure!" He dug his elbow at Holmes. "Real sharp boy, that Mathis."

"Yeah," said Holmes through clenched teeth. "Real sharp."

At the dinner table that evening it was Eloise who broke the silence. "What would you like to do on your birthday, Bob? It's only a couple of weeks off, you know. You'll be forty."

"You don't have to remind me," he said. Middle-age. It was coming, coming on fast and Holmes stood in dread of it. Where had the years gone! It seemed such a short time ago that he was up at the university, living at the frat house and having a ball.

"Bob?" Eloise prodded. "You haven't answered me. Maybe we could get some of the crowd together and go to the club."

He lifted a forkful of creamed potatoes to his mouth. "I'm not particularly looking forward to this birthday, if you don't mind."

"Why? Because you'll be forty?" she laughed teasingly. "Don't be absurd, Bob. You know what they say, life begins at forty—"

"For heaven's sake, spare me the cliché!" he snapped. He pointed his fork down the table at her. "And don't act so damned smug! One of these days *you'll* be sweating out forty!"

"I'm still sweating out thirty," Eloise said with an impish smile. "Forty's a long, long way off. Still, it's nothing to be afraid of."

It was true, he was afraid of being forty. Thirty-nine still had a young ring to it, and then suddenly one day somebody said "Happy Birthday!" and you were forty and you were old.

He glanced down the long table at his wife. Was it a quirk of the light, or was Eloise smiling? Yes, she *was* smiling, a little secret Mona Lisa smile as though she knew something he didn't know. He took a quick drink of his iced tea and tried to dispel the feeling that had come over him. But it wasn't done that easily. The thoughts went on. Nine years he and Eloise had been married now, nine years of the good life on her money. Even his job at her father's brokerage firm

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—more a sinecure than a real job —would go down the drain if anything happened to Holmes' marriage to Eloise.

After another interval of silence Eloise said, "You've been acting strangely, Bob. I don't mean just tonight, but for months now. Is anything wrong?"

Instead of answering her question he posed one of his own. "What'd you do today?"

"Oh, nothing important. I went out to the club and played nine holes."

"With whom did you play?" he said harshly.

She seemed to hesitate a moment, then she said casually, "No one in particular, just some of the girls."

"It must have been jolly to spend the afternoon with some of the girls," he said. "Do you suppose you could come up with their names?"

She gave him a puzzled look. "What is this, Bob, an inquisition?"

He felt the anger well up inside him. He stared down the table at Eloise and he wondered how she could lie with such an innocent, straight face. He was on the verge of confronting her with the item Charlie Fremont had passed on, but he caught himself just as he opened his mouth to speak. Suppose he did accuse Eloise? What then? She might even admit it and where would he go from there. For all practical purposes she could simply laugh in his face. No, this was no time for going off half-cocked.

But Eloise was not finished with it. She slapped her napkin down on the table and glared at him.

"Just what is this all of a sudden?" she demanded. "You're acting like a peevish, suspicious old man!"

He marvelled at the way it had been switched around. Now he was on the defensive. She was the one caught in a lie and the guilt had neatly been transferred over to him. He got up from his half-eaten dinner and went to the sideboard where he poured himself a very large brandy.

"Forget it," he said. "I had a bad day at the office. Just forget it."

Holmes' brandy drinking did not stop with that drink. Each sip seemed to bring to mind some incident that suddenly loomed important. He thought of the Jamaica business with Buzz Franklin, and then there was the time when the gang went down to Sea Island. Something had been going on then between Eloise and Milt Cosgrove. Holmes was no uninitiated

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fool, he knew those secret looks, that seemingly casual touching of hands, those prolonged absences that went unexplained. And there had been the time right here in town after young Lew Ingram got his divorce. Holmes had been the recipient of more than one friendly report of Eloise being seen in this or that cocktail lounge with Lew. Eloise had always had a fondness for transacting both business and pleasure in the chummy environs of a cocktail lounge.

Each time something like that happened Holmes felt no fear for himself. Let her have her little flings, that was his philosophy. She always came home to Daddy. But would she continue coming home? Youth attracted youth. Age repelled it, because youth saw in age the inevitable deterioration it would undergo itself, and it would rather go unreminded of that.

Holmes drank his brandy and his mood deepened. There was no forestalling age. He would soon reach forty, and forty to Holmes was like a big swinging door. On one side was brightness and sunshine, on the other, darkness.

He stared over the top of his glass at Eloise, sitting with such outward content as she watched television, while inside that pretty head she was probably thinking very hard of Eddie Mathis.

Something had to be done. Holmes tossed off the remains of his drink and made his way unsteadily back to the sideboard for a refill. Yes, something *had* to be done . . .

The following morning greeted him with a more than mild hangover. It was almost nine o'clock when he left the house, and even though he was already half an hour late he did not go directly to his office but instead drove to the Import Motor Company.

A sleek yellow sportscar stood in the center of the showroom floor. Holmes had come in a week earlier and looked at the car. He wanted it so badly he could almost taste it.

A salesman came up to him, hands clasped. "She's a beaut, eh, Mr. Holmes?"

Holmes let his hand trail longingly over the car's hood, then he looked around at the salesman. "She's a beauty alright." His gaze wandered past the salesman toward the offices. "Tell Mathis I'd like to see him."

"Ed won't be in until this afternoon. Could I have him call you?"

Holmes frowned and rubbed his chin. He was all primed to tell Mathis off and now Mathis wasn't there. "No, never mind. I'll come

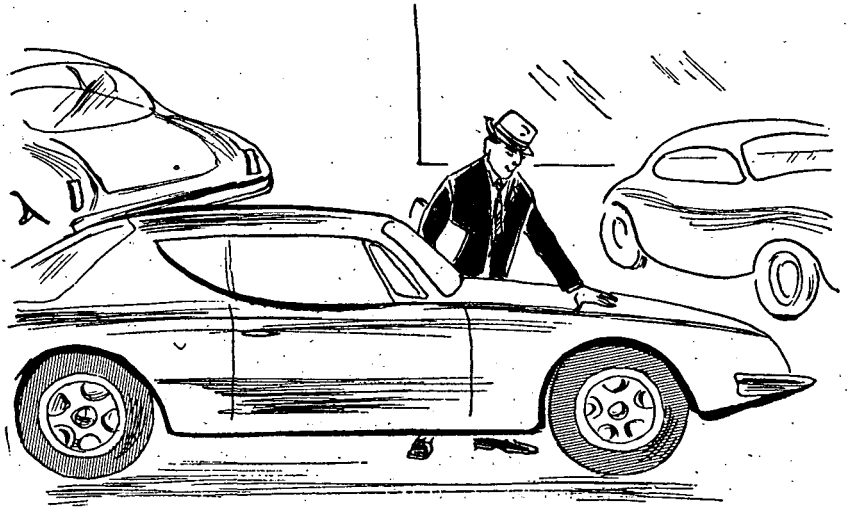
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back later," he mumbled quietly.

Outside, in his own car, Holmes' hangover suddenly seemed worse. To hell with working today, he told himself, and turned the car back the way he had come and drove home.

Eloise's car was gone when he reached the house, and since it was Thursday, the cook was off. For a while Holmes wandered restlessly about the house in a robe, glancing through a magazine, watching television. He was mixing himself a therapeutic Bloody Mary when he recalled what the bartender had told him the day before. He took the drink and went out to the garage. For the better part of an hour he went carefully around the walls looking for the device that Dutch said opened the trapdoor. He was on the verge of giving up, of agreeing with the ex-bootlegger that the room had probably long since been filled in, when he spotted what appeared to be an insignificant flaw in one of the wall studs. He pushed it forcibly with his forefinger and suddenly, just behind him, he heard a rusty squeaking sound. He turned quickly just as a square section of the concrete floor rose slowly, revealing a hole leading down into darkness.

Holmes stared at his discovery blankly for a moment, and then he



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ran to the house with childlike excitement to find a flashlight.

The room was large, approximately the size of the garage itself. The mould-encrusted ceiling was formed of steel I-beams surmounted by the concrete garage floor. The four walls appeared to be form-poured concrete, and the floor was hard packed earth. With the exception of a small wooden table to one side of the stairs the room was empty. The air was close and fetid.

Holmes shone the light about the rectangular space and standing there at the foot of the stairway he began to nod his head slowly. This was it. This was what he had been hoping for, the answer to all his problems. A few details to handle here and there and his future was secure.

On the Thursday a week and two days before his fortieth birthday, Robert Holmes did a very workmanlike job of strangling Eloise. The entire project followed a close timetable. On the morning of the murder he waited patiently at home until Eloise phoned one of the girls with whom she was to play golf. As soon as his wife had hung up the telephone, Holmes throttled her, carried her quickly down into the room beneath the garage, and buried her in the shallow grave he had dug the day he found the room. By the time he carried this out, washed his hands and straightened his tie barely five minutes had elapsed. In another ten minutes he had driven to town, entered his office, remarked to his secretary that he was five minutes late, and taken his seat at his desk.

In accordance with his plan, at four-thirty Holmes complained of a pain in his stomach and asked his secretary to try to reach Eloise. He gave her a list of probable places where Eloise might be found at that particular time of day and sat back and waited for the young woman to report her failure.

In a few minutes the secretary came into his office. "I tried all these places, Mr. Holmes. No one has seen her today. This Mrs.—" she glanced down at the paper in her hand "—Mrs. Bascom said she talked to your wife this morning and that they were supposed to play golf together, but that Mrs. Holmes never showed up."

Holmes frowned. "That's strange. Not like Eloise, not like her at all. Did you try my home phone?"

"Yes sir, that's the first place I tried. No one answered."

"Oh yes, it's Thursday. Cook's day off."

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"How does your stomach feel now?"

"It seems to be getting worse, if anything. It must have been something I had at lunch."

"You shouldn't go home if there's no one there," the girl said, worried.

"Here," Holmes said, writing a number on a piece of memo paper, "this is my cook's telephone number. Call her and explain the situation. Tell her to take a cab out to the house, that I'll be there within the hour."

"Would you like for me to drive you home?" the girl said.

Holmes smiled gratefully. This would account for virtually every second of his time. "That's generous of you, Miss Clark. I hate to inconvenience you."

"It's really no bother, sir. You could leave your car here in the garage and if you felt better tomorrow morning I could pick you up on my way in."

Twenty minutes later, while the cook prepared a broth to sooth his ailing stomach, Holmes made a number of calls to his and Eloise's friends, showing an increasing alarm as word of his wife failed to materialize.

"You suppose she mighta gone on a trip, Mr. Holmes?" the cook put in after Holmes had placed his call to the last of the city's hospitals.

"Her car's still here."

"Maybe you oughta call the police. When my third husband disappeared that's what I did, and they had him back inside of three months. Found him on a park bench up in New York, feedin' the pigeons."

"If I don't hear something within the hour that's exactly what I intend doing," said Holmes.

The cook nodded her head wisely and placed the bowl of broth before him.

Lt. Arthur Jason had been a policeman for more than thirty-five years, and during that time had acquired a certain phlegmatic equanimity. But on this particular morning, three days after Eloise Holmes had been reported missing, he glared over the top of his glasses at the man who stood across the desk and said through clenched teeth, "People do not just disappear, Sgt. Wilkins! She's got to be *some*where!"

"We've checked and rechecked every way she could have left the city. She didn't leave. She's still here someplace. Maybe if we let the newspapers have a crack at it—"

"You know that's out. Her fa-

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ther and the publisher are close as Siamese twins. He doesn't want anything in the paper about it, says she might just have gone away for a while and he doesn't want to embarrass her."

Sgt. Wilkins stood thoughtfully before the cooler and poured himself a cup of water. "That husband knows more about this than he's telling."

"Maybe he killed her?" Lt. Jason said caustically.

"That wouldn't surprise me one bit!"

"And what did he do with the body?"

Sgt. Wilkins shrugged. "Maybe he buried her, or maybe he dissolved her in lye and sent her down the drain."

"And just where might this burial have taken place? We went over every square inch of the grounds out there. Not only that, Holmes can account for almost every second from the time that Mrs. Bascom talked to his wife till the time he phoned in the missing persons report."

"That's just it, his alibi's *too* good!"

"A jury doesn't convict people for having good alibis!"

The day dawned bright and hot. This was no ordinary day, this was Robert Holmes' fortieth birthday. Nine days had gone by since Eloise disappeared and Holmes had cleared with Lt. Jason, telling the police officer that he had decided to spend a few weeks at Sea Island to get away from the strain of the past nine days. Holmes had let the cook off for an indefinite period, and now he was alone in the big house, standing at his chest of drawers, packing a suitcase.

For fifteen minutes he had been vainly searching for the diamond-studded tieclasp that Eloise had given him for his thirty-ninth birthday. He paused and tried to recall when he had last worn it. It had been the day he killed Eloise. He remembered dressing and waiting for Eloise to make her phone call. Later he had carried her hurriedly down into the room, placed her in the grave, and then covered her body over. He had loosened his tie . . .

It had to be down there, in the secret room beneath the garage. That was the only possibility remaining unless he had lost it later the same day. For a moment he thought of simply leaving it there, but that was absurd. The clasp was set with large diamonds and had cost Eloise at least two thousand dollars, probably a good deal more. There was also the chance that someone might stumble onto

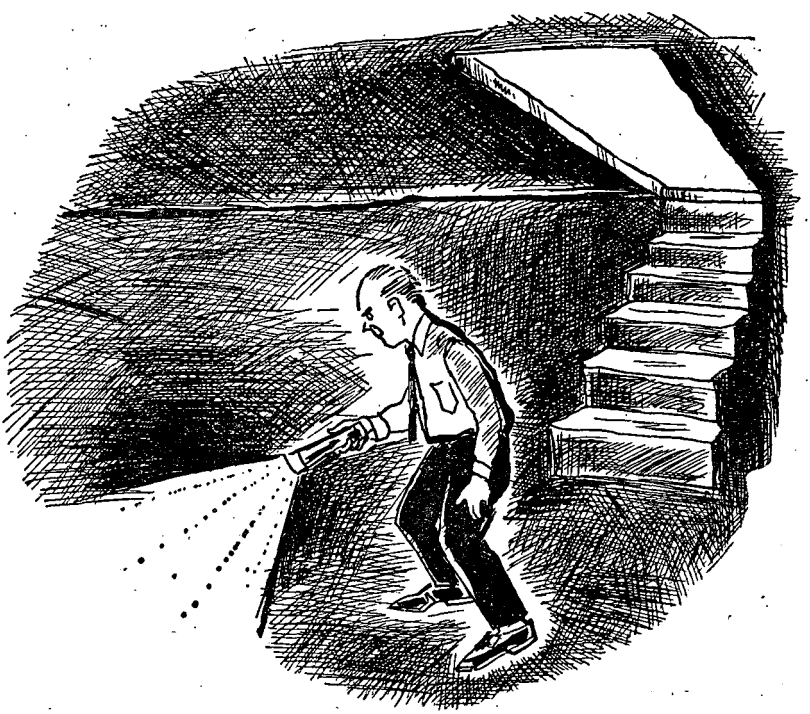
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the room. If Eloise's body were found, and the tieclasp was there with it . . .

Holmes was completely alone. There'd be no risk in retrieving it.

He went out to the garage and opened the trapdoor. He had started down the stairs, probing the beam of the flashlight ahead of him when he heard it. Unmistakeably it was the sound of a car and it was coming up the driveway from the street below. A moment's panic seized him. He was certainly expecting no one. In a flash it went through his mind that it might be that tenacious Lt. Jason.

Holmes took a quick step up the stairs, but realizing there would not be time to get out and close the trapdoor before the car



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hove into view around the house, he continued his descent, letting the floor section close above him.

He placed his ear as close against the door as he could and listened. The first thing he heard was the closing of a car door close by, and then came the sound of a second car pulling to a stop. It *had* to be the police!

"I'll wait here for you," a voice called out.

There was an interval of several minutes, and then a second voice. "Nobody seems to be home. The back door's open but no one came when I rang."

"Might be in the shower."

"She said deliver it this morning, I'm positive of that. It's his birthday."

"What'll we do?"

Suddenly, Holmes recognized one voice. It was Ed Mathis. What the devil was he doing here?

"We'll leave it where it is," Mathis said. "It's paid for. I'll go back to town with you."

Two car doors slammed. An engine started and pulled away. Holmes listened for some time before he took an easy breath. When he was satisfied that Mathis and the other man had gone, he continued down into the room and after a short search located the tie-clasp where he had dropped it.

Now he was ready to go. He had forty minutes to catch his plane, then a few weeks at Sea Island, swimming, sailing, fishing, golf.

He climbed the dark stairs and pushed against the trapdoor. It remained shut. He applied more force, pushing harder. Still nothing. He turned quickly, placing his back against the door, and strained against it with all the power of his back and leg muscles, feeling a wave of terror as the door held.

And then, like a page slowly unfolding before him, he saw it. Ed Mathis. The secret meeting with Eloise. Birthday. And standing there like a poised missile just inches above him, the beautiful yellow sportscar with one wheel resting firmly on the trapdoor.



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Canine



THE SWAMP FOG was coming in, hugging the road like some billowy gray ghost straight out of a movie cartoon; foxfire gleamed from the marshes. The headlights picked up a moving figure as I dipped into the hollow, and I saw it was a woman, stumbling along. She stopped, half turned to face me. I noticed that she had a big fluffy dog on leash.

She was slim, statuesque, and her hair, the color of autumnal broom sedge, tumbled over her head like a muddy waterfall. But that wasn't what popped open my eyes. Her clothes were a mess!

Straight as a reed, bathed in the yellowish beam of the car lights, she wasn't the product of some neurotic pipe dream; I hadn't had a drink all day. It wasn't an illusion. She was there in the flesh, big as life.

I braked the car, then released my foot as if it was camped on a red-hot stove. "Don't be a sucker!" some little voice cautioned. "This is a setup for someone to get his teeth caved in, his wallet lifted—a setup for murder!"

You don't find babes wandering in the swamps late at night, admiring the poison ivy. This was a setup for goons. I just happened to be the first goon to drift into sight.

But still I lingered. Don't ask me why. She was looking at me, and her lips were forming mysterious words.

"Please—help me!" she said.

I sat there, staring. One hand was on the gun in my pocket. Any second I expected to see some burly-boy crash out of the thickets, in an attempt to cave in my head and appropriate my hack.

But nothing happened. She seemed to be alone. Except for that crazy-looking mutt she had with her.

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The dog tugged at its leash now, barking furiously.

"Quiet, Tibby!" she said, yanked him up short. The mutt quit barking, but continued to growl at me.

I jerked a thumb to the rear. "That's a long stretch of lonely road. Where do you fit in?"

She came closer to the car. I saw the bruises on her face.

"I was—assaulted, back there. I'm afraid that Mr. Manwaring is dead."

The name opened my eyes. I motioned to the blackness again.

ACCOMPLICE

"Where is—back there? How far?"

"I don't really know. I've been walking such a long time. There was a cabin, with a broken-down windmill in the yard—"

"And who was Mr. Manwaring?"

"The man I worked for."

It looked as if she might be telling the truth. At least part of what she said was true. I'd passed this same cabin not less than thirty minutes ago.

There was supposed to be a signal, a raised flag on the mailbox. If the flag was up, I'd stop, make a delivery, pick up a package.

But the flag was down. Something had gone wrong. Suspicious, I hadn't stopped.

"Keep talking," I said.

"Mr. Manwaring and I were coming down from Memphis. We got off the highway. Couldn't find a town, or a motel. Then we saw this cabin; a light still gleamed. Mr. Manwaring stopped to ask directions—"

One hand kept tugging at the bit of fluff that was once a dress. I reached over the seat, handed her my topcoat. "What happened then?"

Animals have many admirable qualities, not the least of which is their inability to tell tales, at least in the ordinarily accepted sense of the phrase. This not only makes them pleasant companions, but safe ones, under certain circumstances, and it assures their loyalty.



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She wiggled into the coat. "Two men came out to the car, pulled me out of the seat—"

"What did Manwaring do?"

"Naturally, he took a swing at the first one. But the second man slammed a gun over his head."

She was a provocative female if ever there was one. I sat there, looking at her, trying to reach a decision.

Some intuitive instinct told me that she was lying. It was too fantastic to be true. Even so, you can't just leave a beautiful woman, exhausted, on a deserted swamp road. I clicked open the door at last. "Get in."

She gave me a tight little smile. "May I put Tibby in back?"

"Okay."

I didn't like that big dog. He—or she—was black and fluffy, one of those comical-looking mutts with hair hanging in its eyes, wool long enough to braid.

"What happened after Manwaring was slugged?"

"I—told you. I was assaulted. Finally they went back to their drinking. I managed to slip outside—"

"What happened to your clothes?"

"The men were drunk, sadistic. They ruined my dress."

I swung the car, headed back toward the cabin.

I saw her stiffen, once she realized what I was doing. That Grecian-doll face hardened.

"Where are you going?" she asked, sudden ice in her voice.

"Back to check on your boss."

Her fingers dug into my forearm. "Don't—"

"You don't want me to check?"

"Why? Mr. Manwaring is dead. What good can we do?"

I reached back to pet the dog. She pulled back my hand.

"Don't!" she warned. "Tibby is —quite vicious at times—"

That struck me as unusual. This poodle was a show dog, a parlor hound, not a vicious mongrel baring his teeth to a stranger's hand. Why was she so concerned about me petting the mutt?

Her hand was pressing my arm again. "Please don't go back there!"

"Give me one good reason why?"

"Our lives!"

"You can't sell me!" I said, twisting the steering wheel.

She kept tugging at me. "Take me to the next town down the road—any place—but not back to that cabin!" She shuddered, pulled the coat tighter.

"Berryville is the nearest town," I told her. "It's in the opposite direction, about thirty miles. I'll take you there—but first we

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check! I don't like quick decisions."

She didn't ask who I was. I didn't see any sense in enlightening her, at least not now. She slumped down in the seat, as if the world had caved in on her pretty head.

I drove slowly. The fog was patchy, the road tricky. I was getting jumpy, too, trying to figure out the reason this provocative dame was sharing the seat with me. Finally she slid over, and I felt the pleasant warmth of her hip against mine.

"Why are you so determined to go back to the cabin?"

I couldn't tell her the truth. So I began some evasive rationalizing.

"You say that there were two men. They slugged your boss. What about his car?"

She hesitated just an instant, leading me to believe I had touched a sore spot. "I—hunted for it, after I broke loose. I couldn't locate it."

"Now let me get this straight. You and your boss were coming from Memphis. You got on this secondary road by mistake. Finally you realized that you were lost. You saw this light. Manwaring went up to the cabin to ask directions."

"Yes."

"Two men came out. They pulled you from the car, into the shack. Manwaring put up a fight, got his brains scrambled."

"Yes. I—I fought them all the way—"

She was shivering. Maybe it was genuine. Or she was a very good actress.

"What about your dog—what did it do, all the time the fight was going on?"

"Tibby isn't a fighting dog—"

"All dogs are fighting dogs when someone they love is being attacked."

"They—chained her to a post."

"Okay. The two men finally went back to playing cards. You managed to slip out, escaped in the fog?"

"That's right."

"Where was Manwaring's body, all of this time?"

"In a shed—"

Her story was phony as a three-dollar bill!

This abandoned, isolated cabin was a point of rendezvous. At 11 p.m. tonight I, Nick Sylvia, was to exchange briefcases here with a man named James Manwaring.

Only I wasn't Nick Sylvia!

Go in slowly, my orders read (or Nick's orders read), make a check, to see if the mailbox flag is up. If so, meet the man inside, exchange briefcases, get the hell out of there. No questions asked. You don't get curious in this business,

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just obey orders. I figured that James Manwaring worked for the same outfit Nick did, in a different locality. He was bringing down something from the north, Nick was picking it up, giving him something in return.

Manwaring, evidently, was scheduled to arrive ahead of Nick. Then why hadn't he raised the mailbox flag? Did this dame have something to do with it?

Right now, I'd lay it on the line that something phony had happened. She was mixed up in it to her pretty neck.

I doubted very much that there had been two men at the cabin. When I had passed, driving slowly, it looked very much deserted. But something had happened. Someone had messed up this dame, had put fingernails to her nice, pink skin, inflicting some sizeable scratches. She had taken some hard blows.

Her hand was on my arm again. "Please turn around. Don't go back!"

I braked the car, turned to face her.

"Look, beautiful, let's quit playing pattycake. I don't believe there was anyone at the cabin—just you and Manwaring. For some reason you two tangled. But good! Possibly he wanted to play, you didn't. So he started to wrestle. You got his gun, and you killed him."

"What are you saying?"

"I've just said it. If Manwaring is dead, as you insist, then you're the one who killed him!"

She laughed. It was brittle as peanut candy. "Well, buster, I'll tell you one thing. You'll find him dead all right—but you'll have a hard time trying to pin it on me!"

"You did it, all right!" Suddenly I grabbed her arm. "What made you do it? What was he carrying in that briefcase?"

Her face changed. The anger still was there, but caution was in her eyes as well. They narrowed. She moved over in the seat.

"Just what are you trying to say?"

"Let's level. If you came down from Memphis with Manwaring, you knew that he had a rendezvous at this cabin, with another man."

"A rendezvous?"

"With me. I'm the man he was to meet. To exchange Christmas presents."

"Why would my boss come all the way down here, to meet you in this deserted cabin?"

"Let's just say that he had something in a locked briefcase for me, and I had one for him."

"What were you trading?"

"Stuff."

"Why don't you open your own

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briefcase and check what this stuff is?"

I didn't think she had spotted it, lying on the back seat. I turned; the dog growled at me. The cabin must be around the next curve in the road, I was thinking. A few more moments, then we'd have a showdown—

That was the last coherent thought that registered.

Something slammed down on my head with a sickening impact, the world turned upside down, fog and all. I knew the car was skidding off the road, heading for a pine tree. She was tugging at the wheel, trying to bring it to a stop. Then everything turned into a river of ink.

When I finally came back to the realm of the sinners, she wasn't about. Neither was the French poodle.

Bug-eyed, I saw that the car had smacked into a tree. It looked as if its roving days were over. I crawled out of the seat, wobbling like an old crone. But it seemed there were no bones broken—just that bump on the head.

She had belted me with some heavy instrument—a gun butt! But where did she get the gun?

"She slipped your gun out of your pocket, sucker," the little voice said again. "No, she did not!" I told the emptiness. "My gun was in my left pocket. She couldn't have reached around to get it—"

My mind was clearing fast now. Suddenly I realized that my fist was wrapped around cold steel. She had slugged me—but not with my gun. It didn't make sense.

I stumbled down the road, trying to think things out. The fog was thick and I was almost atop the cabin before I saw it. There was no light, no movement. The flag on the mailbox was still down.

That's when I heard the moaning sound.

It sounded human. It came from the left of the road, where the grade was steep, dropping into a gulch.

Someone was down there, at the foot of the slope. I got down at last, barking my shins on the sharp rocks. The fog was lighter here, and I saw the outlines of a car. It was really wrecked, as if it had tumbled end over end down the embankment. The moans came from a spot to the right of the heap.

I found him, sprawled grotesquely in the brush. I used my lighter, saw he was much older than I. He was well dressed, but his shirt was soaked with his own blood now. Dawn was here, but he wouldn't see it.

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I got my lips down close to his ear. "Are you Manwaring?"

He didn't respond. Then I saw his lips move. And at last he got out a whispered: "Yes."

"I'm Nick Sylvia, the man you were to meet here." The lie didn't hurt too much.

The eyes squeezed open slightly, closed. His lips moved again.

"That—tramp—"

It didn't make sense at first. "You mean the woman?"

He moved his head. I bent over him again. "Tell me, were there two men at the cabin?"

"No one. She's got—the real stuff—" He trailed off.

"I picked her up. She wasn't carrying a thing—"

"I—caught her at—my briefcase. We fought, she's got a gun. Used it on me—pushed the car over the—bank. That—damned—dog—"

He was gone. What he had said didn't register. He maintained she had a gun. She had stolen the real money—the bundle he carried, for the queer I had for him. She had robbed him. He had fought her, torn her clothes. But she had shot him—

I had picked her up, empty-handed. She didn't have the money, nor a gun. Later she had slammed some heavy instrument over my head. Nothing made an iota of sense, unless it had to be . . .

"The dog!" I said at last. "Manwaring mentioned the dog. Now how could this poodle—"

I raised up as someone laughed.

Dawn was here, the fog was lifting. And there she stood, with my coat wrapped about her, the dog on leash.

The gun she held on me seemed steady as a rock. It was aimed at my gizzard.

"Now does it make sense, buster?"

She reached down, fumbled at the dog's shoulders. Then she unwound something from around his middle. It was a hair-coated band, sort of a long bandage—only one side of it was coated with long black dog hair, just like the pooch's mane. When she pulled it off, I saw that the dog had been clipped close around the middle. This girdle blended right in, when it was wrapped around the pooch's belly.

She held up the girdle. I saw the zipper, and I knew now where she had the real money—and where the gun had been concealed. I knew now why she had kept me from petting the dog. She was laughing now—that peanut brittle laugh.

"You're not Nick Sylvia, buster, as you told Manwaring. I should know—I'm Nick's ex-wife."

The gun was still on me.

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"Keep talking, and make it good."

"Nick was carrying a half million in queer. Manwaring had a hundred grand in the real McCoy. Nick was always afraid to cross the Syndicate, but I'm not. So I hooked a ride with Manwaring. I fooled him with the dog, and made the transfer, the green stuff from his bag to the dog's zipper. Only he blundered in, just a moment too soon—"

"You're a real smart cookie—"

The gun came up a little. "Where's Nick, buster?"

"You gunning for him?"

"I have to—now!"

"He's on ice—in a quiet little jail."

"Then you must be a cop."

"Does it show?"

"It does—but it won't for long."

I was watching her wrist. You flex muscles when you pull a trigger. A woman does so, more noticeably than a man. Her wrist stiffened now, and I dived, rolled down the steep hill, gaining momentum like a log from a logger's truck.

She was good. Her first slug spewed dirt in my face, despite the momentum of my roll. The second went through my arm, made me grunt. But I had an old tree stump in front of me now, as a shield, and the gun was in my left hand. She was still blasting. I counted the shots. When the gat was empty I crawled out into the open and started up the hill after her. She threw the gun at my head, started sprinting down the road.

My first slug spewed mud over her, and she pulled up, licked.

The language this chick knew!

Dear Fans:

My desk is so weighed down with mail, requesting information about the Alfred Hitchcock *Fan Club, I hope you won't mind if I reply in an open letter. Here are the particulars:*

Membership dues are fifty cents which covers mailing costs and handling. (Please send coins or money orders, no stamps.) For this you will receive an autographed photo of Mr. *Hitchcock, his biography, and a bulletin of current news, which will be issued four times a year.* You can't imagine how rewarding it is to hear from so many loyal readers, and active, and incoming Fan Club members. I want to thank all of you for your enthusiastic interest.

Most sincerely,

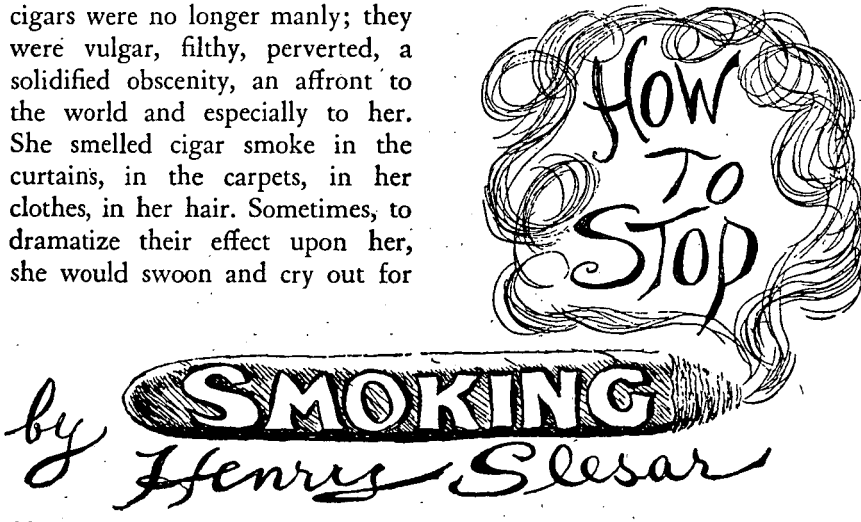
Pat Hitchcock
P.O. Box 434
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THE CELLOPHANE crackled enticingly as Lew Buckberg stripped the wrapper from the panatella. He slid open the top drawer of his desk, until it just touched the gray-vested paunch, and found the sterling cigar-snipper that Suella had given him on a long-forgotten anniversary. He never used the snipper without thinking of Suella as she was then, rosy-cheeked and long-haired, every glance a praise, every word an agreement. She hadn't objected to his cigars then; she said they were manly.

He snipped off the tip of the panatella and thought about Suella as she was now: white of cheek and sharp of tongue, with all her bitterness and disappointment in life focused upon this single trivial complaint. Now his cigars were no longer manly; they were vulgar, filthy, perverted, a solidified obscenity, an affront to the world and especially to her. She smelled cigar smoke in the curtains, in the carpets, in her clothes, in her hair. Sometimes, to dramatize their effect upon her, she would swoon and cry out for a heart specialist. Sometimes, she would threaten to leave him at the next light-up time, but she never did. And lately, she had found a new weapon for her arsenal, the words of advice from Axelrod, the family physician. Now she was taking the unselfish approach: "Those things will kill you, Lew; you *know* what the doctor said."

Grumbling, Lew lit the cigar and took a long puff. He looked at the cigar lengthwise, his heavy brows knitting. The hell of it was, maybe Suella was right. Maybe Axelrod had the straight dope about his smoking: for thirty-seven years he had been filling his mouth and throat and lungs with the heavy blue smoke of cigars ranging from black, knotty twofers in his early struggling



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Who should know better than a loving spouse, how harmful the habit of smoking can be? Especially if she does not smoke herself and abhors the aroma of cigars?



youth to seventy-five cent panatellas in his moderately prosperous middle years. It wasn't that he was addicted to the things, of course, he could quit anytime. It just hadn't *suited* him to quit, that's all there was to it. But there was a time for everything, and as Lew looked up at the framed 1931 group photograph on the office wall, and thought about how few of the shipping company's original staff was still alive, he wondered if the time hadn't arrived. His collar tightened, and he stared at the glowing ash distastefully. But he didn't put it out.

That afternoon, the morbid thoughts returned when his insurance agent, Fred Handle, called to remind him of a tardy premium payment. His joking speech was in poor taste. "After all, Lew," he chuckled, "you never know when they throw that switch on you." Lew was so upset that he stubbed out his cigar. Five minutes later, he was smoking another one.

He told Suella about it that night, but she had no sympathy. "Fred's right," she snapped. "The least you can do is have some consideration for *me*. The way you're going on, I doubt very much if you'll outlive me."

"Now what kind of talk is that?" he said gruffly.

"Sensible talk. But you wouldn't know about *that*."

Angrily, he snipped the end off a cigar. "Sometimes I think you *wish* I was dead. Maybe you'd rather have that eighty grand than me."

"Don't talk like a child. You're almost sixty, for God's sake, you ought to know better."

"I'm only fifty-six. Stop rushing me."

"I'm not rushing you. *That,*" Suella said, pointing a quivering finger to the cigar in his mouth, "*that's* what's rushing you; don't blame it on me."

"A hell of a lot *you'd* care," Lew muttered, and snapped open the evening paper as if he was slamming a door.

The thought that Suella might not really care was neither new nor particularly distressing; he considered it the natural consequence of

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a childless and boring marriage. But a week later, Lew Buckberg had reason to wonder if Suella's attitude was even more complex than he thought.

He was in the living room, fiddling with the dials of a television set that persisted in elongating every figure on the screen. Suella was in the kitchen, making their customary nine o'clock pot of coffee. With a sigh, he gave up on the electronic project, and snapped off the set. He got up, and walked in his stocking feet to the kitchen, approaching so noiselessly that Suella didn't know he was there. Her back was to the doorway, and she was bending over the two cups of coffee on the kitchen drainboard.

Bending over, and doing something.

An instinct, probably protective, made him halt and watch. The motion had been quick, the entire action taking less than five seconds; it might have been some form of subliminal perception which told him what she had done.

She had put something in one of the cups. And it hadn't been cream or sugar; neither one of them used either.

He backed out of the room, and then hurried back to the chair in front of the television set. He flicked it on; amazingly, the screen produced normal-sized figures. But he was no longer interested in the program.

"Here's your coffee," Suella said, in the same flat voice she used to make the announcement every evening. "Anything good on?"

"Same old stuff," he said feebly. "Three westerns and a variety." He watched as she lowered the brimming cup to the snack table by his chair. "You know, I don't think I really want any coffee tonight."

"You don't?" She looked at him sharply. "Why not? You have coffee every night."

"Well, I don't feel like it tonight."

"Is your stomach bothering you? Again?"

"Why do you say again? It hardly ever bothers me."

"With those cigars of yours, I'll bet your insides look like Hell's Kitchen. Drink your coffee, you'll feel better with something hot on your stomach."

"I don't want it," Lew Buckberg said. "Can't you understand plain English? I don't want it!"

She shrugged, took the cup from him, and bore it back to the kitchen. And then Suella, the thrifty housewife, who saved teabags until they were bleached

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white, did an incredible thing. She threw the coffee down the sink.

It was something to brood about, and Lew, whose job as assistant manager of the shipping company was more a sentimental appointment than a business necessity, had plenty of time to brood. He was certain of nothing; he could have been mistaken; Suella might have done nothing at all.

But that night, he tiptoed into the kitchen again.

Suella was just pouring the coffee from the pot, intent upon her task.

Then she reached into the pocket of her apron, and removed a small white pill.

She dropped it into one cup, and it fizzed slightly, rising to the surface and then vanishing into the blackness.

This was the important part. Lew watched it closely. Her right hand picked up the cup that contained the pill.

He scurried back to the living room.

"Here's your coffee," Suella said flatly. "Remember, you said you wanted a cup tonight, so I expect you to drink it."

"Sure," he said. "I want a cup."

"Then here," Suella said, and lowered the cup in her right hand to the table, carefully and slowly.

Fortunately, his wife didn't see the film of nervous perspiration that suddenly covered her husband's face and balding scalp. He swallowed hard, muttered something about a cigar, and fetched one from the box on the breakfront. When he returned to his chair and sat down, his left foot kicked out clumsily and upset the flimsy snack table; the cup and saucer slid to the edge and he made a weak attempt to retrieve it, but he was too late. The cup didn't break (it was plastic) but the coffee was soaked up quickly by the carpet.

Suella cursed his awkwardness, but Lew wasn't listening. When she offered him another cup, he said: "Naw, I guess not. Maybe I'm too jittery lately; maybe I ought to cut down on it."

"Ha!" Suella said.

That night, he lay awake in the bedroom, listening to the sound of his wife's shallow breathing. The emotion that was keeping him sleepless was fear, but as he mulled over the situation, the fear was swiftly replaced by indignation. What right did Suella have to think of murder? Okay, so he *hadn't* made good his promises of a rich, full life. So he *had* grown gruff and rude and vulgar

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in the latter years of their marriage. And perhaps his incessant cigar-smoking *was* symbolic of the hostility he felt towards her. But did that give her the right to drop deadly white pills into his coffee? The more he mulled, the angrier he got. And the more determined.

The next day, his mind was crowded with thoughts of the scene he would play that night.

In the evening, he set the stage carefully. Television set. Slippers. Cigar. Innocent expression.

When Suella didn't rise promptly at eight-forty-five to put on the coffee pot, he turned to her and said:

"How about that coffee? I sure could use a cup tonight."

"I thought you were cutting down?"

"Maybe I will. But not tonight."

"All right," Suella said, without further argument.

At five minutes to nine, the pot stopped bubbling, and Suella returned to the kitchen. Ten seconds later, Lew padded after her, on cat's feet.

She took the pot from the stove, and carried it to the cups and saucers on the sink drainboard. She filled one and then the other, replaced the pot on the stove, and then reached into her apron pocket.

Lew Buckberg lunged forward.

"Aha!" he said.

Suella shrieked, her hand on her heart. "Lew! For God's sake! You almost scared me to death!"

"I did, huh?" he said sardonically, advancing towards her. "Maybe that's only fair, Suella, hah?"

"What are you talking about? What's the matter with you?"

His eyes blazed. "I'll tell you what's the matter. Here's what's the matter, right here!"

Before she could prevent it, his hand was diving into the shallow slanted pocket of her apron. She struggled, but his rage was stronger than her protest, and his thick hand emerged with the tiny white pill between his thumb and forefinger.

"*This* is the matter," he said, his voice trembling. "I've been watching you, Suella, I know what you're up to! But you're not getting away with it. You hear me?"

"But Lew—"

"Don't think I'm so stupid. I know you think more of my insurance policy than me. But it's the last time you get a chance to kill me—"

"Kill you?" She looked at him wildly, and then at the pill in his hand. "*Kill* you? For God's sake, I was only trying to *help* you."

The word stopped him. "Help?"

"Yes, help," Suella rasped. "You know what Dr. Axelrod said about

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your smoking. You know the condition of your heart. But I knew you couldn't stop smoking without outside help—"

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about those pills. Dr. Axelrod gave them to me. They contain some kind of chemical that makes tobacco taste terrible. They're supposed to break you of the habit!"

He looked at the pill, stupidly.

"Dr. Axelrod told me to put them in your coffee," Suella said, dabbing at her eyes. "He said you'd never know it was there, and that you'd soon lose your interest in cigars."

Lew pushed a kitchen chair and sat down.

"So that was it," he whispered. "And I thought . . ."

"Oh, Lew!" Suella said plaintively. "I was only trying to help. I was only trying to keep you healthy."

He reached out and grasped her hand.

"I'm sorry, Suella. It was dumb of me, thinking what I did. I know you meant it for the best." He looked up, his face determined. "And you were right, too. By God, you were right. I won't be a slave to those damned cigars any more."

"Oh, Lew," she said softly. "You know you can't stop."

"I will! Give me that coffee cup. I'll show you I can stop!"

She blinked, and handed it to him. He dropped the pill into the black depths, watched it sizzle and disappear. Then he took a long swallow, triumphantly. She smiled, and patted his balding scalp.

"There," he said. "You see, Suella?"

"I see," she said gently.

He seemed startled at the effect the drink had. His eyes widened, and his fingers grew so stiff that the cup fell to the floor and bounced on the linoleum. Suella made no remark about his clumsiness; she watched carefully as he tried to stand up. He couldn't quite make it; he fell against the sink, groaned, clutched his abdomen, and slid to the floor.

Suella waited a moment, and then bent over him. Satisfied, she straightened up and walked into the living room. She dialed Dr. Axelrod's home number.

"Hello, Harold? It's all over. Yes, the last one you gave me did the trick . . . Better come over and make out the death certificate." He said something, and she giggled. "Of course I do, Poochy."

When she hung up the telephone, she smiled thinly and went to the breakfront. She picked up the cigar box and carried it out to the incinerator in the hall. When she returned, the box was empty.

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Travelers usually make small talk, to pass the time, rather than to cultivate acquaintances who may ripen into friends. One word leads to another, however, and suddenly the scene changes, does it not?

THIS is the first time I've ever been up in an airplane," Mrs. Raleigh said.

Mrs. Borman's lips begrudged a thin smile. "I've flown to St. Louis twice. Before I was married."

Mrs. Raleigh had a round face and small brown eyes. "Just call me Bernice."

"Stella," Mrs. Borman said. "I'm visiting my mother in Pasadena."

"I have nobody out there," Bernice said. "But I've always wanted to visit California. While I'm still young."

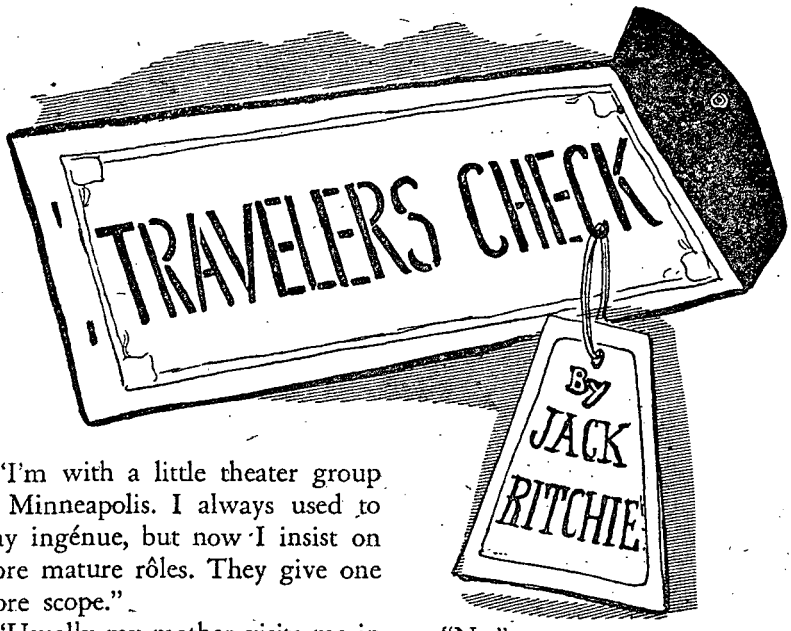
Stella examined her for a flickering moment and decided not to comment on the last statement. After all, they would be in adjacent seats for some five hours.

Bernice giggled slightly. "I'll probably drop in at Hollywood. You can never tell what might happen."

"No," Stella said dryly. "You can't."



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"I'm with a little theater group in Minneapolis. I always used to play ingénue, but now I insist on more mature rôles. They give one more scope."

"Usually my mother visits me in Chicago," Stella said. "And stays for a month or two every year."

"I suppose I really should have taken a train," Bernice said. "Henry—that's my husband—is in railroads. He could have arranged some sort of a pass or discount."

"My husband Walter's in railroads too. A very responsible position. But I prefer to travel by plane."

"This is the air age," Bernice said brightly.

Stella agreed. "You save so much time."

They were silent for half a minute and then Bernice said, "Do you have any children, Stella?"

"No."

"I don't either. Perhaps some time, but right now I have to think of my figure."

"My brother has a boy," Stella said, and the memory seemed to stiffen her lips. "Eight years old and I have to watch him like a hawk when they visit our apartment. He can do all kinds of damage."

"We live in the suburbs of Minneapolis," Bernice said. "A whole quarter acre, ranch style."

"My furniture is cherrywood," Stella said. "Twelve hundred dollars just for the bedroom set. One scratch could absolutely ruin it."

"Everybody seems to have two

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or three children in our neighborhood. So noisy and they tie a person down."

"He spilled an ice cream cone on the rug the last time we saw him," Stella said. "I told Walter not to buy him one."

"We don't go in much for furniture. I take acting lessons. They're very expensive, but I believe in improving the mind and developing oneself."

Stella shifted her purse. "I told Walter I was going to Pasadena this year instead of having my mother come to Chicago. I thought he'd put up an argument, but he got that sneaky look on his face and said, 'Why not? Let's kill two birds with one stone.' "

Bernice sighed. "I had to argue and argue with Henry, but this year he gave in sudden-like and bought me a ticket. You have to keep after a husband in order to get him to provide what you want."

"Imagine Walter using an expression like that," Stella said. "I almost changed my mind about going. Just to teach him a lesson."

"Gregori—he's the famous movie director, you know—once saw one of our plays at the high school auditorium. That was in '57. He complimented the whole cast and I think he'll remember me."

"My mother has orange trees right on the front lawn," Stella said. "And two fig trees in the back."

Bernice patted back a strand of blonde hair. "Every Thursday we have a play reading at our house. I always send Henry down to his basement workshop. He's not interested in intellectual things and he sort of gets in the way."

"Whenever I have my friends over," Stella said, "I send Walter to the movies. Otherwise he just sits there like a log and sometimes even goes to sleep."

"Henry tinkers around in the basement."

"We don't have a basement," Stella said. "Apartment houses don't have basements except for the janitor and storage. So I send Walter to the movies. It's better than him drinking."

Bernice nodded. "That's why I let Henry clutter up the basement."

Stella frowned. "But once in a while I don't think Walter goes to the movies. I can smell it on his breath. Even with the peppermint."

Bernice thought about that. "Henry drinks once in a while too, if I don't watch him."

"Men can be such weaklings," Stella said. "I have to make all the decisions in my house."

"Yesterday I went down to Henry's workshop," Bernice said, "And I asked him what in the

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world he was doing staying up until after midnight."

"Walter doesn't like Mother," Stella said. "But that's no call for him to use an expression like, 'killing two birds with one stone'."

"Henry smiled dirty-like, the way he sometimes does, and he said he was making a bomb. Imagine saying that? I just know he'd been drinking."

"I think Walter drinks when he's away," Stella said. "He's away from home about half the week. His job, you know."

"So is Henry," Bernice said. "He's an engineer and his run is from Minneapolis to Chicago."

Stella's mouth indicated surprise. "It's a small world. Walter's an engineer too and he has the same run. Perhaps the two of them know each other?"

"That could be." Bernice laughed slightly. "Henry once said that one of the advantages of being an engineer is that you could have a woman at either end of the line."

There were approximately fifteen seconds of silence and then they looked at each other sharply.

Stella spoke first. "Walter weighs about one-sixty and he's losing his hair."

Bernice seemed to pale. "Henry has blue eyes and wears gold-rimmed spectacles."

Stella lost color too. "Walter has a bridge on the lower right hand side."

Bernice closed her eyes. "Henry has a mole on his left hip."

And then, of course, Bernice remembered that Henry had insisted on packing her suitcases and that they were now in the luggage compartment in the rear of the plane.

And perhaps one of them had a little device that went *tick, tick, tick*.

They reached the pilot's compartment at 8:39 and began their frantic story.

In the cab of the Diesel making its run from Minneapolis to Chicago, the engineer glanced at his watch for the tenth time in the last five minutes.

At 8:40, he smiled.

Broadly.



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The provocative title of this story will, I hope, arouse your curiosity as it did mine. Traditionally, and poetically, Brother Death creeps on silent feet, as does his Sister Sleep, stealing upon his unsuspecting victim.



DETECTIVE Abraham Levine of Brooklyn's Forty-Third Precinct sat at his desk in the squadroom and longed for a cigarette. The fingers of his left hand kept closing and clenching, feeling awkward without the paper-rolled tube of tobacco. He held a pencil for a while but unconsciously brought it to his mouth. He didn't realize what he was doing till he tasted the gritty staleness of the eraser. Then he put the pencil

By Donald Westlake

away in a drawer, and tried unsuccessfully to concentrate on the national news in the news magazine.

The world conspired against a man who tried to give up smoking. All around him were other

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The Sound of Murder

a Novelette

people puffing cigarettes casually and unconcernedly, not making any fuss about it at all, making by their very nonchalance his own grim reasons for giving them up seem silly and hyper-sensitive. If he isolated himself from other smokers with the aid of television or radio, the cigarette commercials with their erotic smoking and their catchy jingles would surely drive him mad. Also, he would find that the most frequent sentence in popular fiction was, "He lit another cigarette." Statesmen and entertainers seemed inevitably to be smoking whenever news photographers snapped them for posterity, and even the news items were against him: He had just reread for the third time an announcement to the world that Pope John XXIII was the first Prelate of the Roman Catholic Church to smoke cigarettes in public.

Levine closed the magazine in irritation, and from the cover smiled at him the Governor of a midwestern state, cigarette in FDR cigarette-holder at a jaunty angle in his mouth. Levine closed his eyes, saddened by the knowledge that he had turned himself at this late date into a comic character. A

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grown man who tries to give up smoking *is* comic, a Robert Benchley or a W. C. Fields, bumbling along, plagued by trivia, his life an endless gauntlet of minor crises. *They could do a one-reeler on me,* Levine thought. *A great little comedy. Laurel without Hardy. Because Hardy died of a heart attack.*

Abraham Levine, at fifty-three years of age, was twenty-four years a cop and eight years into the heart-attack range. When he went to bed at night, he kept himself awake by listening to the silence that replaced every eighth or ninth beat of his heart. When he had to climb stairs or lift anything heavy, he was acutely conscious of the labored heaviness of his breathing and of the way those missed heartbeats came closer and closer together, every seventh beat and then every sixth and then every fifth—

Some day, he knew, his heart would skip two beats in a row, and on that day Abraham Levine would stop, because there wouldn't be any third beat. None at all, not ever.

Four months ago, he'd gone to the doctor, and the doctor had checked him over very carefully, and he had submitted to it feeling like an aging auto brought to a mechanic by an owner who wanted to know whether it was worth while to fix the old boat up or should he just junk the thing and get another. (In the house next door to his, a baby cried every night lately. The new model, crying for the old and the obsolete to get off the road.)

So he'd gone to the doctor, and the doctor had told him not to worry. He had that little skip in his heartbeat, but that wasn't anything dangerous, lots of people had that. And his blood pressure was a little high, but not much, not enough to concern himself about. So the doctor told him he was healthy, and collected his fee, and Levine left, unconvinced.

So when he went back again three days ago, still frightened by the skip and the shortness of breath and the occasional chest cramps when he was excited or afraid, the doctor had told him the same things all over again, and had added, "If you really want to do something for that heart of yours, you can give up smoking."

He hadn't had a cigarette since, and for the first time in his life he was beginning really to understand the wails of the arrested junkies, locked away in a cell with nothing to ease their craving. He was beginning to be ashamed of himself, for having become so completely dependent on something so useless and so harmful. Three days

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now. Comic or not, he was going to make it.

Opening his eyes, he glared at the cigarette-smoking Governor and shoved the magazine into a drawer. Then he looked around the squadroom, empty except for himself and his partner, Crawley, sitting over there smoking contentedly at his desk by the filing cabinet as he worked on a report. Rizzo and McFarlane, the other two detectives on this shift, were out on a call but would probably be back soon. Levine longed for the phone to ring, for something to happen to distract him, to keep mind and hands occupied and forgetful of cigarettes. He looked around the room, at a loss, and his left hand clenched and closed on the desk, lonely and incomplete.

When the rapping came at the door, it was so faint that Levine barely heard it, and Crawley didn't even look up. But any sound at all would have attracted Levine's straining attention. He looked over, saw a foreshortened shadow against the frosted glass of the door, and called, "Come in."

Crawley looked up. "What?"

"Someone at the door." Levine called out again, and this time the doorknob hesitantly turned, and a child walked in.

It was a little girl of about ten, in a frilly frock of pale pink, with a flared skirt, with gold-buckled black shoes and ribbed white socks. Her hair was pale blonde, combed and brushed and shampooed to gleaming cleanliness, brushed back from her forehead and held by a pink bow atop her head, then cascading straight down her back nearly to her waist. Her eyes were huge and bright blue, her face a creamy oval. She was a little girl in an ad for children's clothing in the Sunday Times. She was a story illustration in Ladies Home Journal. She was Alice in Blunderland, gazing with wide-eyed curious innocence into the bullpen, the squadroom, the home and office of the detectives of the Forty-Third Precinct, the men whose job it was to catch the stupid and the nasty so that other men could punish them.

She saw, looking into this brutal room, two men and a lot of old furniture. One of the men, Jack Crawley, clearly belonged to this room. A big and bulky man in his middle forties, he was square-faced and heavy-jowled, with lines of toughness and distrust around cold eyes and grim mouth. He looked the part of the tough cop, and played the part well, and was nearly as tough as he looked.

The other man, Levine, looked out of place here. He was short and chunky, the lines of his body

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all softened within his brown suit, his face round, soft-eyed, sensitive-lipped, lined by worry and doubt and frailty. His graying hair, clipped stiff and short in a harsh military crewcut, only emphasized the softness of the rest of him. An unsuccessful small businessman, a friendly but poor uncle, that was Levine. Not a harness bull in a squadroom.

It was inevitably to Levine that the little girl spoke: "May I come in?" Her voice was as faint as her tapping on the door had been. She was poised to flee at the first loud noise.

Levine automatically lowered his own voice when he answered. "Of course. Come on in. Sit over here." He motioned at the straight-backed wooden chair beside his desk.

The girl crossed the threshold, carefully closed the door again behind her, and came on silent feet across the room, glancing sidelong at Crawley, then establishing herself on the edge of the chair, her toes touching the floor, still ready for flight at any second. She studied Levine. "I want to talk to a detective," she said. "Are you a detective?"

Levine nodded. "Yes, I am."

"My name," she told him solemnly, "is Amy Thornbridge Walker. I live at 717 Prospect Park West, apartment 4-A. I want to report a murder, a quite recent murder."

"A murder?"

"My mother," she said, just as solemnly, "murdered my stepfather."

Levine glanced over at Crawley, who screwed his face up in an expression meant to say, "She's a nut. Hear her out, and then she'll go home. What else can you do?"

There was nothing else he could do. He looked at Amy Thornbridge Walker again. "Tell me about it," he said. "When did it happen?"

"Two weeks ago Thursday," she said. "November 27th. At two-thirty p.m."

Her earnest calm called for belief. But children with wild stories were not unknown to the precinct. Children came in with reports of dead bodies in alleys, flying saucers on rooftops, counterfeiters in basement apartments, kidnappers in black trucks—And once out of a thousand times what the child reported was real and not the product of a young imagination on a spree. More to save the little girl's feelings than for any other reason, therefore, Levine drew to him a pencil and a sheet of paper and took down what she told him. He said, "What's your mother's name?"

"Gloria Thornbridge Walker," she said. "And my stepfather was

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Albert Walker. He was an attorney."

To the side, Crawley was smiling faintly at the girl's conscious formality. Levine solemnly wrote down the names, and said, "Was your father's name Thornbridge, is that it?"

"Yes. Jason Thornbridge. He died when I was very small. I think my mother killed him, too, but I'm not absolutely sure."

"I see. But you *are* absolutely sure that your mother killed Albert Walker."

"My stepfather. Yes. My first father was supposed to have drowned by accident in Lake Champlain, which I consider very unlikely, as he was an excellent swimmer."

Levine reached into his shirt pocket, found no cigarettes there, and suddenly realized what he was doing. Irritation washed over him, but he carefully kept it from showing in his face or voice as he said, "How long have you thought that your mother killed your rea—your first father?"

"I'd never thought about it at all," she said, "until she murdered my stepfather. Naturally, I then started thinking about it."

Crawley coughed, and lit a fresh cigarette, keeping his hands up in front of his mouth. Levine said, "Did he die of drowning, too?"

"No. My stepfather wasn't athletic at all. In fact, he was nearly an invalid for the last six months of his life."

"Then how did your mother kill him?"

"She made a loud noise at him," she said calmly.

Levine's pencil stopped its motion. He looked at her searchingly, but found no trace of humor in her eyes or mouth. If she had come up here as a joke—on a bet, say, from her schoolmates—then she was a fine little actress, for no sign of the joke was on her face at all.

Though how could he really tell? Levine, a childless man with a barren wife, had found it increasingly difficult over the years to communicate with the very young. A part of it, of course, was an envy he couldn't help, in the knowledge that these children could run and play with no frightening shortness of breath or tightness of chest, that they could sleep at night in their beds with no thought for the dull thudding of their hearts, that they would be alive and knowing for years and decades, for *decades,* after he himself had ceased to exist.

Before he could formulate an answer to what she'd said, the little girl jounced off the chair with the graceful gracelessness of the young and said, "I can't stay any longer. I stopped here on my way home

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from school. If my mother found out that I knew, and that I had told the police, she might try to murder me, too." She turned all at once and studied Crawley severely. "I am not a silly little girl," she told him. "And I am not telling a lie or making a joke. My mother murdered my stepfather, and I came in here and reported it. That's what I'm supposed to do. You aren't supposed to believe me right away, but you are supposed to investigate and find out whether or not I've told you the truth. And I have told you the truth." She turned suddenly back to Levine, an angry little girl—no, not angry, *definite*—a definite little girl filled with stern formality and a child's sense of rightness and duty. "My stepfather," she said, "was a very good man. My mother is a bad woman. You find out what she did, and punish her." She nodded briefly, as though to punctuate what she'd said, and marched to the door, reaching it as Rizzo and McFarlane came in. They looked down at her in surprise, and she stepped past them and out to the hall, closing the door after her.

Rizzo looked at Levine and jerked his thumb at the door. "What was that?"

It was Crawley who answered. "She came in to report a murder," he said. "Her Mommy killed her Daddy by making a great big noise at him."

Rizzo frowned. "Come again?"

"I'll check it out," said Levine. Not believing the girl's story, he still felt the impact of her demand on him that he do his duty. All it would take was a few phone calls. While Crawley recounted the episode at great length to Rizzo, and McFarlane took up his favorite squadroom position, seated at his desk with the chair canted back and his feet atop the desk, Levine picked up his phone and dialed the New York Times. He identified himself and said what he wanted, was connected to the proper department, and after a few minutes the November 28th obituary notice on Albert Walker was read to him. Cause of death: a heart attack. Mortician: Junius Merriman. An even briefer call to Merriman gave him the name of Albert Walker's doctor, Henry Sheffield. Levine thanked Merriman, assured him there was no problem, and got out the Brooklyn yellow pages to find Sheffield's number. He dialed, spoke to a nurse, and finally got Sheffield.

"I can't understand," Sheffield told him, "why the police would be interested in the case. It was heart failure, pure and simple. What seems to be the problem?"

"There's no problem," Levine

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told him. "Just checking it out. Was this a sudden attack? Had he had any heart trouble before?"

"Yes, he'd suffered a coronary attack about seven months ago. The second attack was more severe, and he hadn't really recovered as yet from the first. There certainly wasn't anything else to it, if that's what you're getting at."

"I didn't mean to imply anything like that," said Levine. "By the way, were you Mrs. Walker's first husband's doctor, too?"

"No, I wasn't. His name was Thornbridge, wasn't it? I never met the man. Is there some sort of question about him?"

"No, not at all." Levine evaded a few more questions, then hung up, his duty done. He turned to Crawley and shook his head.



"Nothing to—"

A sudden crash behind him froze the words in his throat. He half-rose from the chair, mouth wide open, face paling as the blood rushed from his head, his nerves and muscles stiff and tingling.

It was over in a second, and he sank back into the chair, turning around to see what had happened. McFarlane was sheepishly picking himself up from the floor, his chair lying on its back beside him. He grinned shakily at Levine. "Leaned back too far that time," he said.

"Don't do that," said Levine, his voice shaky. He touched the back of his hand to his forehead, feeling cold perspiration slick against the skin. He was trembling all over. Once again, he reached to his shirt pocket for a cigarette, and this time felt an instant of panic when he found the pocket empty. He pressed the palm of his hand to the pocket, and beneath pocket and skin he felt the thrumming of his heart, and automatically counted the beats. Thum, thum, *skip*, thum, thum, thum, thum, *skip*, thum, thum,—

On the sixth beat, the *sixth* beat. He sat there listening, hand pressed to his chest, and gradually the agitation subsided and the skip came every seventh beat and then every eighth beat, and then he could dare to move again.

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He licked his lips, needing a cigarette now more than at any other time in the last three days, more than he could ever remember needing a cigarette at any time in his whole life.

His resolve crumbled. Shamefacedly, he turned to his partner. "Jack, do you have a cigarette?"

Crawley looked away from McFarlane, who was checking himself for damage. "I thought you were giving them up, Abe," he said.

"Not around here. Please, Jack."

"Sure." Crawley tossed him his pack.

Levine caught the pack, shook out one cigarette, threw the rest back to Crawley. He took a book of matches from the desk drawer, put the cigarette in his mouth, feeling the comforting familiarity of it between his lips, and struck a match. He held the match up, then sat looking at the flame, struck by a sudden thought.

Albert Walker had died of a heart attack. "She made a loud noise at him." "The second attack was more severe, and he hadn't really recovered as yet from the first."

He shook the match out, took the cigarette from between his lips. It had been every sixth beat there for a while, after the loud noise of McFarlane's backward dive.

Had Gloria Thornbridge Walker *really* killed Albert Walker?

Would Abraham Levine *really* kill Abraham Levine?

The second question was easier to answer. Levine opened the desk drawer and dropped the cigarette and matches into it.

The first question he didn't try to answer at all. He would sleep on it. Right now, he wasn't thinking straight enough.

At dinner that night, he talked it over with his wife. "Peg," he said, "I've got a problem."

"A problem?" She looked up in surprise, a short solid stout woman three years her husband's junior, her iron-gray hair rigidly curled in a home permanent. "If you're coming to me," she said, "it must be awful."

He smiled, nodding. "It is." It was rare for him to talk about his job with his wife. The younger men, he knew, discussed their work with their wives as a matter of course, expecting and receiving suggestions and ideas and advice. But he was a product of an older upbringing, and still believed instinctively that women should be shielded from the more brutal aspects of life. It was only when the problem was one he couldn't discuss with Crawley that he turned

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to Peg for someone to talk to. "I'm getting old," he said suddenly, thinking of the differences between himself and the younger men.

She laughed. "That's your problem? Don't feel lonely, Abe, it happens to all kinds of people. Have some more gravy."

"Let me tell you," he said. "A little girl came in today, maybe ten years old, dressed nicely, polite, very intelligent. She wanted to report that her mother had killed her stepfather."

"A little girl?" She sounded shocked. She too believed that there were those who should be shielded from the more brutal aspects of life, but with her the shielded ones were children. "A little girl? A thing like that?"

"Wait," he said. "Let me tell you. I called the doctor and he said it was a heart attack. The stepfather —Mr. Walker—he'd had one attack already, and the second one on top of it killed him."

"But the little girl blames the mother?" Peg leaned forward. "Psychological, you think?"

"I don't know. I asked her how her mother had done the killing, and she said her mother made a loud noise at her father."

"A joke." She shook her head. "These children today, I don't know where they get their ideas. All this on the TV—"

"Maybe," he said. "I don't know. A man with a bad heart, bedridden, an invalid. A sudden shock, a loud noise, it might do it, bring on that second attack."

"What else did this little girl say?"

"That's all. Her stepfather was good, and her mother was bad, and she'd stopped off on her way home from school. She only had a minute, because she didn't want her mother to know what she was doing."

"You let her go? You didn't question her?"

Levine shrugged. "I didn't believe her," he said. "You know the imagination children have."

"But now?"

"Now, I don't know." He held up his hand, two fingers extended. "Now," he said, "there's two questions in my mind. First, is the little girl right or wrong. Did her mother actually make a loud noise that killed her stepfather or not? And if she did, then question number two: Did she do it on purpose, or was it an accident?" He waggled the two fingers and looked at his wife. "Do you see? Maybe the little girl is right, and her mother actually did cause the death, but not intentionally. If so, I don't want to make things worse for the mother by dragging it into the open. Maybe the little girl is wrong altogether,

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and if so it would be best to just let the whole thing slide. But maybe she's right, and it *was* murder, and then that child is in danger, because if I don't do anything, she'll try some other way, and the mother will find out."

Peg shook her head. "I don't like that, a little girl like that. Could she defend herself? A woman to kill her husband, a woman like that could kill her child just as easy. I don't like that at all, Abe."

"Neither do I." He reached for the coffee cup, drank. "The question is, what do I do?"

She shook her head again. "A child like that," she said. "A woman like that. And then again, maybe not." She looked at her husband. "For right now," she said, "you eat. We can think about it."

For the rest of dinner they discussed other things. After the meal, as usual, the craving for a cigarette suddenly intensified, and he was unable to concentrate on anything but his resolution. They watched television during the evening, and by bedtime he still hadn't made a decision. Getting ready for bed, Peg suddenly said, "The little girl. You've been thinking?"

"I'll sleep on it," he said. "Maybe in the morning. Peg, I am longing for a cigarette."

"Nails in your coffin," she said bluntly. He blinked, and went away silently to brush his teeth.

The lights turned out, they lay together in the double bed which now, with age, had a pronounced sag toward the middle, rolling them together. But it was a cold night out, a good night to lie close together and feel the warmth of life. Levine closed his eyes and drifted slowly toward sleep.

A sudden sound shook him awake. He blinked rapidly, staring up in the darkness at the ceiling, startled, disoriented, not knowing what it was. But then the sound came again, and he exhaled, releasing held breath. It was the baby from next door, crying.

Move over, world, and give us room, he thought, giving words to the baby's cries. *Make way for the new.*

And they're right, he thought. *We've got to take care of them, and guide them, and then make way for them. They're absolutely right.*

I've got to do something for that little girl, he thought.

In the morning, Levine talked to Crawley. He sat in the client's chair, beside Crawley's desk. "About that little girl," he said.

"You, too? I got to thinking about it myself, last night."

"We ought to check it out," Levine told him.

"I know. I figure I ought to look up the death of the first father.

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Jason Thornbridge, wasn't it?"

"Good," said Levine. "I was thinking of going to her school, talking to her teacher. If she's the kind of child who makes up wild stories all the time, then that's that, you know what I mean?"

"Sure. You know what school she's in?"

"Lathmore Elementary, over on Third."

Crawley frowned, trying to remember. "She tell you that? I didn't hear it if she did."

"No, she didn't. But it's the only one it could be." Levine grinned sheepishly. "I'm pulling a Sherlock Holmes," he said. "She told us she'd stopped in on her way home from school. So she was walking home, and there's only three schools in the right direction—so we'd be between them and Prospect Park—but they're close enough for her to walk." He checked them off on his fingers. "There's St. Aloysius, but she wasn't in a school uniform. There's PS 118, but with a Prospect Park West address and the clothing she was wearing and her good manners, she doesn't attend any public school. So that leaves Lathmore."

"Okay, Sherlock," said Crawley. "You go talk to the nice people at Lathmore. I'll dig into the Thornbridge thing."

"One of us," Levine told him, "ought to check this out with the Lieutenant first. Tell him what we want to do."

"Fine. Go ahead."

Levine scraped the fingers of his left hand together, embarrassment reminding him of his need for a cigarette. But this was day number four, and he was going to make it. "Jack," he said, "I think maybe you ought to be the one to talk to him."

"Why me? Why not you?"

"I think he has more respect for you."

Crawley snorted. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"No, I mean it, Jack." Levine grinned self-consciously. "If I told him about it, he might think I was just dramatizing it, getting emotional or something, and he'd say thumbs down. But you're the level-headed type. If you tell him it's serious, he'll believe you."

"You're nuts," said Crawley.

"You *are* the level-headed type," Levine told him. "And I *am* too emotional."

"Flattery will get you everywhere. All right, go to school."

"Thanks, Jack."

Levine shrugged into his coat and plodded out of the squadroom, downstairs, and out to the sidewalk. Lathmore Elementary was three blocks away to the right, and he walked it. There was a smell of snow in the air, but the sky was

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still clear. Levine strolled along sniffing the snow-tang, his hands pushed deep into the pockets of his black overcoat. The desire for a smoke was less when he was outdoors, so he didn't hurry.

Lathmore Elementary, one of the myriad private schools which have sprung up to take the place of the enfeebled public school system long since emasculated by municipal politics, was housed in an old mansion on one of the neighborhood's better blocks. The building was mainly masonry, with curved buttresses and bay windows everywhere, looming three ivy-overgrown stories to a patchwork slate roof which dipped and angled and rose crazily around to no pattern at all. Gold letters on the wide glass pane over the double-doored entrance announced the building's new function, and just inside the doors an arrow on a wall was marked 'OFFICE'.

Levine didn't want to have to announce himself as a policeman, but the administrative receptionist was so officious and curious that he had no choice. It was the only way he could get to see Mrs. Pidgeon, the principal, without first explaining his mission in minute detail to the receptionist.

Mrs. Pidgeon was baffled, polite, terrified and defensive, but not very much of any of them. It was as though these four emotions were being held in readiness, for one of them to spring into action as soon as she found out just exactly what it was a police officer could possibly want in Lathmore Elementary. Levine tried to explain as gently and vaguely as possible:

"I'd like to talk to one of your teachers," he said. "About a little girl, a student of yours."

"What about her?"

"She made a report to us yesterday," Levine told her. "It's difficult for us to check it out, and it might help if we knew a little more about her, what her attitudes are, things like that."

Defensiveness began to edge to the fore in Mrs. Pidgeon's attitude. "What sort of report?"

"I'm sorry," said Levine. "If there's nothing to it, it would be better not to spread it."

"Something about this school?"

"Oh, no," said Levine, managing not to smile. "Not at all."

"Very well." Defensiveness receded, and a sort of cold politeness became more prominent. "You want to talk to her teacher, then."

"Yes."

"Her name?"

"Amy Walker. Amy Thornbridge Walker."

"Oh, yes!" Mrs. Pidgeon's face suddenly lit with pleasure, not at Levine but at his reminding her of

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that particular child. Then the pleasure gave way just as suddenly to renewed bafflement. "It's about Amy? *She* came to you yesterday?"

"That's right."

"Well." She looked helplessly around the room, aching to find out more but unable to find a question that would get around Levine's reticence. Finally, she gave up, and asked him to wait while she went for Miss Haskell, the fifth grade teacher. Levine stood as she left the room, then sank back into the maroon leather chair, feeling bulky and awkward in this hushed heavy-draped office.

He waited five minutes before Mrs. Pidgeon returned, this time with Miss Haskell in tow. Miss Haskell, unexpectedly, was a comfortable fortyish woman in a sensible suit and flat shoes, not the thin tall bird he'd expected. He acknowledged Mrs. Pidgeon's introduction, hastily rising again, and Mrs. Pidgeon pointedly said, "Try not to be too long, Mr. Levine. You may use my office."

"Thank you."

She left, and Levine and Miss Haskell stood facing each other in the middle of the room. He motioned at a chair. "Would you sit down, please?"

"Thank you. Mrs. Pidgeon said you wanted to ask me about Amy Walker."

"Yes, I want to know what kind of child she is, anything you can tell me about her."

Miss Haskell smiled. "I can tell you she's a brilliant and well-brought-up child," she said. "That she's the one I picked to be student in charge while I came down to talk to you. That she's always at least a month ahead of the rest of the class in reading the assignments, and that she's the most practical child I've ever met."

Levine reached to his cigarette pocket, cut the motion short, awkwardly returned his hand to his side. "Her father died two weeks ago, didn't he?"

"That's right."

"How did they get along, do you know? Amy and her father."

"She worshipped him. He was her stepfather actually, having married her mother only about a year ago, I believe. Amy doesn't remember her real father. Mr. Walker was the only father she knew, and having been without one for so long—" Miss Haskell spread her hands. "He was important to her," she finished.

"She took his death hard?"

"She was out of school for a week, inconsolable. She spent the time at her grandmother's, I understand. The grandmother caters to her, of course. I believe her mother had a doctor in twice."

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"Yes, her mother." Levine didn't know what to do with his hands. He clasped them in front of him. "How do Amy and her mother get along?"

"Normally, so far as I know. There's never been any sign of discord between them that I've seen." She smiled again. "But my contact with Amy is limited to school hours, of course."

"You think there is discord?"

"No, not at all. I didn't mean to imply that. Just that I couldn't give you an expert answer to the question."

Levine nodded. "You're right. Is Amy a very imaginative child?"

"She's very self-sufficient in play, if that's what you mean."

"I was thinking about story-telling."

"Oh, a liar." She shook her head. "No, Amy isn't the tall tale type. A very practical little girl, really. Very dependable judgment. As I say, she's the one I left in charge of the class."

"She wouldn't be likely to come to us with a wild story she'd made up all by herself."

"Not at all. If Amy told you about something, it's almost certainly the truth."

Levine sighed. "Thank you," he said, "Thank you very much."

Miss Haskell rose to her feet. "Could you tell me what this wild story was? I might be able to help."

"I'd rather not," he said. "Not until we're sure, one way or the other."

"If I can be of any assistance—"

"Thank you," he said again. "You've already helped."

Back at the station, Levine entered the squadroom and hung up his coat. Crawley looked over from his desk and said, "You have all the luck, Abe. You missed the whirlwind."

"Whirlwind?"

"Amy's mama was here. Dr. Sheffield called her about you checking up on her husband's death, and just before she came over here she got a call from somebody at Lathmore Elementary, saying there was a cop there asking questions about her daughter. She didn't like us casting aspersions on her family."

"Aspersions?"

"That's what she said." Crawley grinned. "You're little Sir Echo this morning, aren't you?"

"I need a cigarette. What did the Lieutenant say?"

"She didn't talk to him. She talked to me."

"No, when you told him about the little girl's report."

"Oh. He said to take two days on it, and then let him know how it looked."

"Fine. How about Thornbridge?"

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"Accidental death. Inquest said so. No question in anybody's mind. He went swimming too soon after lunch, got a stomach cramp, and drowned. What's the word on the little girl?"

"Her teacher says she's reliable. Practical and realistic. If she tells us something, it's so."

Crawley grimaced. "That isn't what I wanted to hear, Abe."

"It didn't overjoy me, either." Levine sat down at his desk. "What did the mother have to say?"

"I had to spill it, Abe. About what her daughter reported."

"That's all right," he said. "Now we've got no choice. We've got to follow through. What was her reaction?"

"She didn't believe it."

Levine shrugged. "She had to, after she thought about it."

"Sure," said Crawley. "Then she was baffled. She didn't know why Amy would say such a thing."

"Was she home when her husband died?"

"She says no." Crawley flipped open a memo pad. "Somebody had to be with him all the time, but he didn't want a professional nurse. So when Amy came home from school that afternoon, the mother went to the supermarket. Her husband was alive when she left, and dead when she got back. Or so she says."

"She says Amy was the one who found him dead?"

"No. Amy was watching television. When the mother came home, she found him, and called the doctor."

"What about noises?"

"She didn't hear any, and doesn't have any idea what Amy means."

Levine sighed. "All right," he said. "We've got one timetable discrepancy. Amy says her mother was home and made a loud noise. The mother says she was out to the supermarket." His fingers strayed to his cigarette pocket, then went on to scratch his shoulder instead. "What did you think of the mother, Jack?"

"She's tough. She was mad, and she's used to having things her own way. I can't see her playing nursemaid. But she sure seemed baffled about why the kid would make such an accusation."

"I'll have to talk to Amy again," said Levine. "Once we've got both stories, we can see which one breaks down."

Crawley said, "I wonder if she'll try to shut the kid's mouth?"

"Let's not think about that yet. We've still got all day." He reached for the phone book and looked up the number of Lathmore Elementary.

Levine talked to the girl in Mrs. Pidgeon's office at eleven o'clock.

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At his request, they were left alone.

Amy was dressed as neatly as she had been yesterday, and seemed just as composed. Levine explained to her what had been done so far on the investigation, and that her mother had been told why the investigation was taking place. "I'm sorry, Amy," he said, "but we didn't have any choice. Your mother had to know."

Amy considered, solemn and formal. "I think it will be all right," she said. "She wouldn't dare try to hurt me now, with you investigating. It would be too obvious. My mother is very subtle, Mr. Levine."

Levine smiled, in spite of himself. "You have quite a vocabulary," he told her.

"I'm a very heavy reader," she explained. "Though it's difficult for me to get interesting books from the library. I'm too young, so I have to take books from the children's section." She smiled thinly. "I'll tell you a secret," she said. "I steal the ones I want to read, and then bring them back when I'm finished with them."

In a hurry, he thought, smiling, and remembered the baby next door. "I want to talk to you," he said, "about the day when your father died. Your mother said she went out to the store, and when she came back he was dead. What do you say?"

"Nonsense," she said, promptly. "*I* was the one who went out to the store. The minute I came home from school, she sent me out to the supermarket. But I came back too soon for her."

"Why?"

"Just as I was coming down the hall from the elevator, I heard a great clang sound from our apartment. Then it came again as I was opening the door. I went through the living room and saw my mother coming out of my stepfather's room. She was smiling. But then she saw me and suddenly looked terribly upset and told me something awful had happened, and she ran to the telephone to call Dr. Sheffield. She acted terribly agitated, and carried on just as though she really meant it. She fooled Dr. Sheffield completely."

"Why did you wait so long before coming to us?"

"I didn't know what to do." The solemn formality cracked all at once, and she was only a child after all, uncertain in an adult world. "I didn't think anyone would believe me, and I was afraid if mother suspected what I knew, she might try to do something to me. But Monday in Civics Miss Haskell was talking about the duties of the different parts of government, firemen and policemen and everybody, and she said the duty of

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the police was to investigate crimes and see the guilty were punished. So yesterday I came and told you, because it didn't matter if you didn't believe me, you'd have to do your duty and investigate anyway."

Levine sighed. "All right," he said. "We're doing it. But we need more than just your word, you understand that, don't you? We need proof of some kind."

She nodded, serious and formal again.

"What store did you go to that day?" he asked her.

"A supermarket. The big one on Seventh Avenue."

"Do you know any of the clerks there? Would they recognize you?"

"I don't think so. It's a great big supermarket. I don't think they know any of their customers at all."

"Did you see anyone at all on your trip to the store or back, who would remember that it was you who went to the store and not your mother, and that it was that particular day?"

She considered, touching one finger to her lips as she concentrated, and finally shook her head. "I don't think so. I don't know any of the people in the neighborhood. Most of the people I know are my parents' friends or kids from school, and they live all over, not just around here."

The New York complication. In a smaller town, people know their neighbors, have some idea of the comings and goings around them. But in New York, next-door neighbors remain strangers for years. At least that was true in the apartment house sections, though less true in the quieter outlying sections like the neighborhood in which Levine lived.

Levine got to his feet. "We'll see what we can do," he said. "This clang you told me about. Do you have any idea what your mother used to make the noise?"

"No, I don't. I'm sorry. It sounded like a gong or something. I don't know what it could possibly have been."

"A tablespoon against the bottom of a pot? Something like that?"

"Oh, no. Much louder than that."

"And she didn't have anything in her hands when she came out of the bedroom?"

"No, nothing."

"Well, we'll see what we can do," he repeated. "You can go back to class now."

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you for helping me."

He smiled. "It's my duty," he said. "As you pointed out."

"You'd do it anyway, Mr. Levine," she said. "You're a very good man. Like my stepfather."

Levine touched the palm of his hand to his chest, over his heart.

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"Yes," he said. "In more ways than one, maybe. Well, you go back to class. Or, wait. There's one thing I can do for you."

She waited as he took a pencil and a small piece of memo paper from Mrs. Pidgeon's desk, and wrote on it the precinct phone number and his home phone number, marking which each was. "If you think there's any danger of any kind," he told her, "any trouble at all, you call me. At the precinct until four o'clock, and then at home after that."

"Thank you," she said. She folded the paper and tucked it away in the pocket of her skirt.

At quarter to four, Levine and Crawley met again in the squadroom. When he'd come back in the morning from his talk with the little girl, Levine had found Crawley just back from having talked with Dr. Sheffield. It was Sheffield's opinion, Crawley had told him, that Amy was making the whole thing up, that her stepfather's death had been a severe shock and this was some sort of delayed reaction to it. Certainly he couldn't see any possibility that Mrs. Walker had actually murdered her husband, nor could he begin to guess at any motive for such an act.

Levine and Crawley had eaten lunch together in Wilton's, across the street from the station, and then had separated, both to try to find someone who had seen either Amy or her mother on the shopping trip the afternoon Mr. Walker had died. This, aside from the accusation of murder itself, was the only contradiction between their stories. Find proof that one was lying, and they'd have the full answer. So Levine had started at the market and Crawley at the apartment building, and they'd spent the entire afternoon up and down the neighborhood, asking their questions and getting only blank stares for answers.

Crawley was there already when Levine came slowly into the squadroom, worn from an entire afternoon on his feet, climaxed by the climb to the precinct's second floor. He looked at Crawley and shook his head. Crawley said, "Nothing? Same here. Not a damn thing."

Levine laboriously removed his overcoat and set it on the coatrack. "No one remembers," he said. "No one saw, no one knows anyone. It's a city of strangers we live in, Jack."

"It's been two weeks," said Crawley. "Their building has a doorman, but he can't remember that far back. He sees the same tenants go in and out every day, and he wouldn't be able to tell you for sure who went in or out yesterday,

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much less two weeks ago, he says."

Levine looked at the wall-clock. "She's home from school by now," he said.

"I wonder what they're saying to each other. If we could listen in, we'd know a hell of a lot more than we do now."

Levine shook his head. "No. Whether's she guilty or innocent, they're both saying the exact same things. The death is two weeks old. If Mrs. Walker did commit murder, she's used to the idea by now that she's gotten away with it. She'll deny everything Amy says, and try to convince the girl she's wrong. The same things in the same words as she'd use if she were innocent."

"What if she kills the kid?" Crawley asked him.

"She won't. If Amy were to disappear, or have an accident, or be killed by an intruder, we'd know the truth at once. She can't take the chance. With her husband, all she had to do was fool a doctor who was inclined to believe her in the first place. Besides, the death was a strong possibility anyway. This time, she'd be killing a healthy ten year old, and she'd be trying to fool a couple of cops who wouldn't be inclined to believe her at all." Levine grinned. "The girl is probably safer now than she was before she ever came to us," he said. "Who knows what the mother might have been planning up till now?"

"All right, that's fine so far. But what do we do now?"

"Tomorrow, I want to take a look at the Walker apartment."

"Why not right now?"

"No. Let's give her a night to get rattled. Any evidence she hasn't removed in two weeks she isn't likely to think of now." Levine shrugged. "I don't expect to find anything," he said. "I want to look at the place because I can't think of anything else to do. All we have is the unsupported word of a ten year old child. The body can't tell us anything, because there wasn't any murder weapon. Walker died of natural causes. Proving they were induced won't be the easiest job in the world."

"If only *somebody*," said Crawley angrily, "had seen that kid at the grocery store! That's the only chink in the wall, Abe, the only damn place we can get a grip."

"We can try again tomorrow," said Levine, "but I doubt we'll get anywhere." He looked up as the door opened, and Trent and Kasper came in, two of the men on the four to midnight shift. "Tomorrow," he repeated. "Maybe lightning will strike."

"Maybe," said Crawley.

Levine shrugged back into his overcoat and left the office for the day. When he got home, he broke

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his normal habit and went straight into the house, not staying on the porch to read his paper. He went out to the kitchen and sat there, drinking coffee, while he filled Peg in on what little progress they'd made on the case during the day. She asked questions, and he answered them, offered suggestions and he mulled them over and rejected them, and throughout the evening, every once in a while, one or the other of them would find some other comment to make, but neither of them got anywhere. The girl seemed to be reasonably safe, at least for a while, but that was the best that could be said.

The baby next door was crying when they went to bed together at eleven o'clock. The baby kept him awake for a while, and his thoughts on the Walker death revolved and revolved, going nowhere. Once or twice during the evening, he had absent-mindedly reached for a cigarette, but had barely noticed the motion. His concentration and concern for Amy Walker and her mother was strong enough now to make him forget his earlier preoccupation with the problem of giving up smoking. Now, lying awake in the dark, the thought of cigarettes didn't even enter his head. He went over and over what the mother had said, what the daughter had told him, and gradually he drifted off into deep, sound sleep.

He awoke in a cold sweat, suddenly knowing the truth. It was as though he'd dreamed it, or someone had whispered it in his ear, and now he knew for sure.

She would kill her tonight, and she would get away with it. He knew how she'd do it, and when, and there'd be no way to get her for it, no proof, nothing, no way at all.

He sat up, trembling, cold in the dark room, and reached out to the nightstand for his cigarettes. He pawed around on the nightstand, and suddenly remembered, and pounded the nightstand with his fist in frustration and rage. She'd get away with it!

If he could get there in time—He could stop her, if he got there in time. He pushed the covers out of the way and climbed from the bed. Peg murmured in her sleep and burrowed deeper into the pillow. He gathered his clothes and crept from the bedroom.

He turned the light on in the living room. The clock over the television set read ten till one. There might still be time, she might be waiting until she was completely asleep. Unless she was going to do it with pills, something to help sleep, to make sleep a per-

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manent, everlasting sure thing.

He grabbed the phone book and looked up the number of one of the private cab companies on Avenue L. He dialed, and told the dispatcher it was urgent, and the dispatcher said a car would be there in five minutes.

He dressed hurriedly, in the living room, then went out to the kitchen for pencil and paper, and left Peg a short note. "I had to go out for a while. Be back soon." In case she woke up. He left it on the nightstand.

A horn sounded briefly out front and he hurried to the front of the house, turning off lights. As he went trotting down the walk toward the cab, the baby next door cried out. He registered the sound, thought, *Baby next door,* and dismissed it from his mind. He had no time for extraneous thoughts, about babies or cigarettes or the rasp of his breathing from only this little exertion, running from the house. He gave the address, Prospect Park West, and sat back in the seat as the cab took off. It was a strange feeling, riding in a cab. He couldn't remember the last time he'd done it. It was a luxuriant feeling. To go so fast with such relaxing calm. If only it was fast enough.

It cost him four dollars, including the tip. If she was still alive, it was the bargain of the century.

But as he hurried into the building and down the long narrow lobby to the elevators, the sound he'd heard as he'd left his home came back to him, he heard it again in memory, and all at once he realized it hadn't been the baby next door at all. It had been the telephone.

He pressed the elevator button desperately, and the elevator slid slowly down to him from the eleventh floor. It had been the ring of the telephone.

So she'd made her move already. He was too late. When he'd left the house, he'd been too late.

The elevator doors opened, and he stepped in, pushed the button marked 4. He rode upward.

He could visualize that phone call. The little girl, hushed, terrified, whispering, beseeching. And Peg, half-awake, reading his note to her. And he was too late.

The door to apartment 4-A was ajar, the interior dark. He reached to his hip, but he'd been in too much of a hurry. The gun was at home, on the dresser.

He stepped across the threshold, cautiously, peering into the dark. Dim light spilled in from the hallway, showing him only this section of carpet near the door. The rest of the apartment was pitch black.

He felt the wall beside the door, found the light switch and clicked it on.

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The light in the hall went out.

He tensed, the darkness now complete. A penny in the socket? And this was an old building, in which the tenants didn't pay directly for their own electricity, so the hall light was on the same line as the foyer of apartment A on every floor. They must have blown a fuse once, and she'd noticed that.

But why? What was she trying for?

The telephone call, as he was leaving the house. Somehow or other, she'd worked it out, and she knew that Levine was on his way here, that Levine knew the truth.

He backed away toward the doorway. He needed to get to the elevator, to get down and away from here. He'd call the precinct. They'd need flashlights, and numbers. This darkness was no place for him, alone.

A face rose toward him, luminous, staring, grotesque, limned in pale cold green, a staring devil face shining in green fire against the blackness. He cried out, instinctive panic filling his mouth with bile, and stumbled backwards away from the thing, bumping painfully into the doorpost. And the face disappeared.

He felt around him, his hands shaking, all sense of direction lost. He had to get out, he had to find the door. She was trying to kill



him, she knew he knew and she was trying to kill him the same way she'd killed Walker. Trying to stop his heart.

A shriek jolted into his ears, loud, loud, incredibly loud, magnified far beyond the power of the human voice, a world-filling scream of hatred, grating him to the bone, and his flailing hands touched a wall, he leaned against it trembling. His mouth was open, straining for air, his chest was clogged, his heart beat fitfully, like the random motions of a wounded animal. The echoes of the shriek faded away, and then it sounded again, even louder, all around him, vibrating him like a fly on a pin.

He pushed away from the wall, blind and panic-stricken, wanting only to get away, to be away, out

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of this horror, and he stumbled into an armchair, lost his balance, fell heavily forward over the chair and rolled to the floor.

He lay there, gasping, unthinking, as brainlessly terrified as a rabbit in a trapper's snare. Pinwheels of light circled the corners of his stinging eyes, every straining breath was a searing fire in his throat. He lay on his back, encumbered and helpless in the heavy overcoat, arms and legs curled upward in feeble defense, and waited for the final blow.

But it didn't come. The silence lengthened, the blackness of the apartment remained unbroken, and gradually rationality came back to him and he could close his mouth, painfully swallow saliva, lower his arms and legs, and listen.

Nothing. No sound.

She'd heard him fall, that was it. And now she was waiting, to be sure he was dead. If she heard him move again, she'd hurl another thunderbolt, but for now she was simply waiting.

And the wait gave him his only chance. The face had only been phosphorescent paint on a balloon, pricked with a pin when he cried out. The shriek had come, most likely, from a tape recorder, played at full volume. That's all it was, a balloon and a tape recorder. Nothing that could kill him, nothing that could injure him, if only he kept in his mind what they were, and what she was trying to do.

My heart is weak, he thought, *but not that weak. Not as weak as Walker's, still recovering from his first attack. It could kill Walker, but it couldn't quite kill me.*

He lay there, recuperating, calming, coming back to himself. And then the flashlight flicked on, and the beam was aimed full upon him.

He raised his head, looked into the light. He could see nothing behind it. "No, Amy," he said. "It didn't work"

The light flicked off.

"Don't waste your time," he said into the darkness. "If it didn't work at first, when I wasn't ready for it, it won't work at all."

"Your mother is dead," he said, speaking softly, knowing she was listening, that so long as she listened she wouldn't move. He raised himself slowly to a sitting position. "You killed her, too. Your father and mother both. And when you called my home, to tell me that she'd killed herself, and my wife told you I'd already left, you knew then that I knew. And you had to kill me, too. I'd told you that my heart was weak, like your father's. So you'd kill me, and it would simply be another heart failure, brought on by the sight of your mother's corpse."

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The silence was deep and complete, like a forest pool. Levine shifted, gaining his knees, moving cautiously and without sound.

"Do you want to know how I knew?" he asked her. "Monday in Civics Miss Haskell told you about the duties of the police. But Miss Haskell told me that you were always at least a month ahead in your studies. Two weeks before your stepfather died, you read that assignment in your schoolbook, and then and there you decided how to kill them both."

He reached out his hand, cautiously, touched the chair he'd tripped over, shifted his weight that way, and came slowly to his feet, still talking. "The only thing I don't understand," he said, "is why. You steal books from the library that they won't let you read. Was this the same thing to you? Is it all it was?"

From across the room, she spoke, for the first time. "You'll never understand, Mr. Levine," she said. That young voice, so cold and adult and emotionless, speaking out contemptuously to him in the dark.

And all at once he could *see* the way it had been with Walker. Somnolent in the bed, listening to the frail fluttering of the weary heart, as Levine often lay at night, listening and wondering. And suddenly that shriek, out of the mid-afternoon stillness, coming from nowhere and everywhere, driving in at him—

Levine shivered. "No," he said. "It's you who don't understand. To steal a book, to snuff out a life, to you they're both the same. You don't understand at all."

She spoke again, the same cold contempt still in her voice. "It was bad enough when it was only *her*. Don't do this, don't do that. But then she had to marry him, and there were two of them watching me all the time, saying no no no, that's all they ever said. The only time I could ever have some peace was when I was at my grandmother's."

"Is *that* why?" He could hear again the baby crying, the gigantic ego of the very young, the imperious demand that *they* be attended to. And in the place of terror, he now felt only rage. That this useless half-begun thing should kill, and kill—

"Do you know what's going to happen to you?" he asked her. "They won't execute you, you're too young. They'll judge you insane, and they'll lock you away. And there'll be guards and matrons there, to say don't do this and don't do that, a million million times more than you can imagine. And they'll keep you locked away in a little room, forever and ever, and

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they'll let you do *nothing* you want to do, *nothing*."

He moved now, feeling his way around the chair, reaching out to touch the wall, working his way carefully toward the door. "There's nothing you can do to me now," he said. "Your bag of tricks won't work, and I won't drink the poison you fed your mother. And no one will believe the suicide confession you forged. I'm going to phone the precinct, and they'll come and get you, and you'll be locked away in that tiny room, forever and ever."

The flashlight hit the floor with a muffled thud, and then he heard her running, away from him, deeper into the apartment. He crossed the room with cautious haste, hands out before him, and felt around on the floor till his fingers blundered into the flashlight. He picked it up, clicked it on, and followed.

He found her in her mother's bedroom, standing on the window sill. The window was open wide, and the December wind keened into the room. The dead woman lay reposed on the bed, the suicide note conspicuous on the night-stand. He shone the light full on the girl, and she warned him, "Stay away. Stay away from me."

He walked toward her. "They'll lock you away," he said. "In a tiny, tiny room."

"No, they won't!" And she was gone from the window.

Levine breathed, knowing what he had done, that he had made it end this way. She hadn't ever understood death, and so it was possible for her to throw herself into it. The parents begin the child, and the child ends the parents. A white rage flamed in him at the thought.

He stepped to the window and looked down at the broken doll on the sidewalk far below. In another apartment, above his head, a baby wailed, creasing the night. *Make way, make way.*

He looked up. "We will," he whispered. "We will. But in our own time. Don't rush us."



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